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TIE AND TRICK

A Melodramatic Story.

BY

HAWLEY SMART,

AUTHOR OF "BREEZIE LANGTON," "THE GREAT TONTINE," "AT FAULT," "HARD LINES," "FROM POST TO FINISH," ETC. ETC.

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TIE AND TRICK.

CHAPTER I.

CROSSING THE STRAITS.

A CROSS chopping sea and a fresh sou'-wester sweeping boisterously up Channel, a day to make a bad sailor shiver and be profoundly thankful that necessity did not compel him to cross "the Straits." The Calais boat bobs like a cork as it ploughs its way across the capricious, irritable bit of water that lies between it and Dover. A grey November day, presaging that winter is at hand, and conveying grim warning that another year is near struck from the brief span of our lives; by no means an inspiriting day for a man to look out upon who is conscious of misused opportunities, and that he has been wasting much money on his autumn holiday; moodily reflecting, too, that long-suffering creditors in a few weeks will again anxiously clamour for settlement of their accounts.

A tall soldier-like fellow is Fred Hammerton as he stands, enveloped in a huge ulster, leaning against the lee side of the entrance to the saloon stairs, and painfully conscious that he has spent the last two months in a most unprofitable fashion. It is not that he has any remorse, far from it; nothing but an angry feeling of disappointment pervades his mind. He is simply a gambler returning from an unsuccessful campaign. Commencing life in a cavalry regiment, and with a thousand or twelve hundred a year of his own, Hammerton had about as pleasant a start in life as any

young fellow of good family need wish for; but he was cursed with extravagant desires and a spirit of self-indulgence. When you deny yourself nothing it is possible to prove the insufficiency of any moderate income, and Fred Hammerton had for the last few years led a somewhat hand-to-mouth existence.

"Your country gives us a grim greeting, my friend," growled his companion in English, which, though excellent, had a slightly foreign accent. "It is most detestably cold for the time of year. I hate your sea, too; I never want to smoke when I am at sea—a sure sign it disagrees with me."

"Yes, I suppose it does, though you're not a bad sailor; but when you can't face your cigarette, Count, there's certainly something amiss with you."

"It's a good many years since I was in London," rejoined the Count, musingly; "and then, *ma foi*, it was about the only place in Europe good for my health."

Hammerton looked hard at his companion, a slight, dark, wiry man, of medium height, whose usually well-waxed moustache was now unmistakably out of curl. Count Patroceni was rather a mystery. He was rumoured to be an Italian of good family, who had been engaged in every revolutionary movement on the Continent almost from his boyhood. He was said to have had marvellous escapes from the dungeons of the Bourbons, and even from the executioner's hands; but nobody could put all the shadowy gossip concerning him into circumstantial shape, and the Count was vague in the extreme about his earlier adventures. At present he was known as a man of gentlemanly address, much addicted to play, and mingling freely in a certain class of society. He had a large and numerous, if not very select, circle of acquaintance, but still it was never hinted that Patroceni was an adventurer. If he gambled there was no insinuation that he was amongst the wolves of the play-table, keenly alive to fattening on the insular lambkin. He

had, apparently, plenty of money, and displayed unmistakable ability to take care of it, but no undue desire to possess himself of that of his neighbour. In short, if he played it was apparently as an amusement and not from greed of gain. Hammerton had met him once or twice before on his visits to the Continent, and this time it had ended in Patroceni accompanying him back to London.

"Well, we shall cut our stay in town short. It might be good for your health last time you were there, but it's not a nice place this sort of weather. You told me you shoot; you must come down and try your hand at the Wrottsley pheasants. My uncle will be delighted to see you."

"Let us hope so. I have done plenty of shooting in my own country,—but we are near our deliverance," and as he spoke the packet glided under the lee of the Admiralty Pier at Dover, and speedily commenced the discharge of its small freight of miserable humanity. Green and pallid, these struggled into the train, only too thankful not to be called upon to wrestle with the Customs' officials after the manner of former times, and buried their woes in the recesses of the railway carriages. Our travellers took advantage of the slight halt at the Dover Station to dash across at Hammerton's suggestion to the buffet, and there pull themselves together with a tolerably stiff dose of brandy and seltzer—it is only the young and uninstructed that drink soda, and so much were the pair rehabilitated by this simple and favourite remedy that the habitual cigar adorned their lips as the engine gave forth its final warning shriek of departure.

What motive had induced Patroceni to volunteer to accompany him to England was far beyond Hammerton's conjecture. The Count had merely said it was his whim to once more visit London, and had simply asked to be allowed to travel with him and profit by his superior knowledge of the city in regard to lodgings, hotels, or what not; and perhaps his dear friend knew one of the more liberal-minded

clubs to which it was possible to introduce a foreigner, who, as he (Hammerton) could testify, had received admission to the *cercles* of Homburg, Nice, &c. People who knew the Count thoroughly, and they were few, would have told you very little of his life was uncalculated. What his motive might be was ever a problem difficult of solution, but he was distinctly not given to whims in the ordinary acceptance of the term. Hammerton, a tolerably easy-going man, was under two obligations to the Count: one, that of some slight pecuniary assistance; of the other, more anon. Hammerton smoked on in meditative silence. Both men were absorbed in their own thoughts and keen enjoyment of the tobacco which that malicious sou'-wester had so long prohibited, to say nothing that not having the carriage to themselves barred confidential conversation had they desired it. Hammerton—who had some time back found the duties of a profession, for which he had never felt any great enthusiasm, too irksome for his pleasure-loving disposition—was revolving in his mind that the time had at length arrived when the playing of what he had always considered his last card could no longer be delayed. His cousin, Maude Eversley, was a very pretty girl, with thirty thousand pounds of her own, the fortune of her dead mother, which she came into positively when she came of age. Fred Hammerton had known her from her childhood, and had long ago settled that she would make him an excellent wife when circumstances made it expedient that he should settle down, and Fred felt that circumstances had made it of late not only expedient but imperative that he should at all events *settle*.

He was not in love with his cousin, but they had always been capital friends, and he undoubtedly liked no other woman better. To people unaware of Fred Hammerton's disposition and pursuits the engagement would appear suitable enough. The young lady was in her twenty-first year, the gentleman some nine or ten years older: while the world

generally could form no idea that Hammerton had run through the best part of his means and was a sorely-needy man. His mode of life gave no indication that he was in difficulties. Men of his stamp never draw in their horns till the crash comes; they neither attempt nor affect the economies, whether it be in the matter of clothes, carriages, cigars, dry champagne, or expenditure. In the use of ready money only are they wont to be reticent, reserving that strictly to meet such expenses as cannot possibly be relegated to the ledger.

Fred Hammerton had found himself an orphan early in life, with his uncle Sir Jasper Eversley as his guardian, and Wrottsley Hall had been the home of his boyhood. There he had passed his holidays as a school-boy, there he had passed much of his leave in the days of his military life, and there his room and a hearty welcome remained to him still. He was a great favourite with the baronet, who did not heed vague rumours that sometimes reached him, to the effect that his nephew was in with a very fast set, most of whom were likely to come to infinite grief if they did not moderate the pace at which they were living. Fred was a good all-round sportsman, a fairly good man either to hounds or with his gun, and those were virtues that stood high in Sir Jasper's estimation. What matter if his nephew was a little wild; all young fellows with any spirit in them sowed their wild oats and were none the worse for it when they settled down; and the baronet chuckled with the remembrance that he, too, had "heard the chimes by midnight," and drank and gambled a great deal more than was good for him, in the days when William IV. was king. Sir Jasper had not married till verging upon the forties, and it had been a matter of deep disappointment that no successor to Wrottsley had been born to him; but his wife, to whom he was devotedly attached, presented him with only one child, albeit they passed some fourteen or fifteen happy years together. The lawyers in their wisdom had settled Lady Eversley's

thirty thousand pounds on her for her life, and at her death to be divided between her children. All, of course, now centred in Maude. As for Wrottsley, it was mostly entailed, and would pass at Sir Jasper's death to his younger brother, a clergyman holding a comfortable living in a distant county.

Fred Hammerton knew from many a talk with Sir Jasper that his uncle, although the subject was never openly broached between them, would be well satisfied should he win Maude for his wife, and make Wrottsley their home as long as Sir Jasper lived; and this, Fred Hammerton, in the plenitude of his conceit and selfishness, thought would do very nicely when it should suit his highness to relinquish his liberty.

Patroceni could hardly have explained his motive in accompanying Hammerton to England even if he would. It amounted simply to this: he had obtained a hold over a man of birth and position, and it was a maxim of the Count's, whenever that happened, it was worth while to see what use you could make of him. It might be none, but it was very rarely that he did not exact a *quid pro quo*, or, to use his own expression, find music for them to dance to. The Continent was getting a little dull, he thought, except perhaps Paris. It would be as well to accompany Hammerton to his own country, to see him amongst his own friends and acquaintance, and then he would be better able to judge what capabilities of usefulness his dear friend possessed. The captain could, at all events, introduce him to English society to some extent, a privilege which he had not achieved upon his former visit, and he had much curiosity to mix in that London world, of whose wealth and luxury he had heard so much. Perhaps he might win the heart of some blonde English Madam or Miss, and a cynical smile curled Patroceni's mouth as the thought crossed his mind; for, though his manners were soft and polished enough, the boudoir had figured little midst the scenes in which his life had been chiefly passed, and love-tales received scant telling from his

lips. Singing of bullet and ringing of sabre had been more familiar to his ears than the soft accents of a woman's voice. He was more at home in the fierce battle of the card-table than in the wiles and manœuvres of the salon, and yet the man's keen, subtle intelligence and vast experience of life were calculated to enable him to hold his own in the latter with the most veteran intriguer.

On arrival in London the pair drove straight to Hammerton's chambers, a luxurious set of rooms which quite admitted of entertaining a guest, and where it had been settled the Count should instal himself for a few days while he looked round for suitable accommodation for himself. Already his host wondered ruefully why he had asked him, and pondered somewhat moodily over the rash promises he had made to introduce him to society and clubs when at Homburg. He was, as before said, under an obligation to him then, and like most men at such times somewhat profuse in gratitude. The promise of these introductions had seemed at the moment to mean nothing, but he had been made to understand lately that they did not admit of retractation, and somehow it did not all seem quite so easy as it did at Homburg. He had been told that the Count was a man of good Italian family, he had seen that Patroceni enjoyed the *entrée* of the best—albeit somewhat hybrid—society of some three or four Continental watering-places. But then, Hammerton was quite aware London demanded rather more than this before it admitted the stranger within its pale. Ah, well, this is all rapidly changing, the cordon gets looser year by year, the Peris who fretted at the gates at the date of my story are in the midst of the whirlpool now, and some years hence there will probably be but little embargo laid on those able to pay for it—a mere question of whether you are rich enough to know. All this troubled Hammerton not a little; clearly the first thing to be done was to write to his uncle and tell him that he proposed coming down immediately to help shoot the covers, and ask if he might bring a friend

with him, a foreign nobleman, who had shown him great courtesy during his trip abroad. There was no difficulty about this. He knew well what Sir Jasper's answer would be.—"Come by all means, my dear Fred, only too glad to see you; and any friend of yours is, as you know, heartily welcome;" and yet Hammerton felt a strange disinclination to introduce this man under his uncle's roof. He could not account for it; it was nothing more than a hazy, undefined idea that it was not right to bring to Wrottsley any one of whose antecedents he really knew next to nothing. He had no reason to suppose the Count anything but what he represented himself. Patroceni had certainly been very kind to him, and he had no reason to doubt him; but he certainly did wish he had not promised this thing, and he was puzzled to think how he had come to do it. Puzzled, forsooth! it was the soft, malleable mind pitted against the astute brain and will of iron. The ordinary hand grasping the velvet glove and grip of steel. From the time he swallowed that bait of assistance, the jaws of the rat-trap had snapped upon him little as he wotted of it. However, there was no need to trouble himself about that just now. During the couple of days that would intervene before Sir Jasper's answer could arrive it would be quite sufficient to dine Patroceni at one of his clubs, take him to a theatre, and perhaps introduce him to a few men in the smoking-room. All this commits one to very little; these club smoking-rooms see queer guests at times, men who may be voted very amusing to smoke a cigar with now and again, but men whom the members have not the slightest disposition to see enrolled amongst themselves.

"Now, Count, that we have shaken the dust of travel from our persons," said Fred, as he entered the sitting-room, "the next thing is evidently to wash the raw sea-air from our throats, and to recuperate ourselves for the abstinence that abominable crossing usually inflicts. They cook decently at the Harlequin, and their champagne is unimpeachable,

but they're a volatile body and apt to be a little boisterous. At the Blenheim we have even better cookery, their claret is commendable, and the quietude almost depressing. Which shall it be?"

"At best your climate is depressing enough. Let it be the Harlequin, with light, life, and champagne," rejoined the Count, promptly.

CHAPTER II.

WROTTSLEY.

The breakfast hour at Wrottsley was an expansive ten for the community at large, although those intending to hunt or shoot had to be up betimes, and had disappeared before the majority of the ladies, at all events, gathered in the dining-room. A large, low, one-storied house, with a *porte cochère* entering upon a double hall in its centre—the outer and smaller hall was decorated with many a "head," trophies of the prowess of Sir Jasper in Scotch deer-forests in his younger days, and divers other victims of his bow and spear in the guise of fox-brushes, stuffed birds, &c., and was also strewn with the litter of rough overcoats, hats, caps, and walking-sticks, that the hall of all country houses presents. The inner was very lofty, with a gallery running all round it, and exhibited nothing but its dark-polished oak-boards. From this hall doors opened in all directions: on the ground floor to the drawing-rooms, billiard-room, dining-room, &c.; on the gallery to the bed-rooms, lying on either side. In short, the halls formed the centre of the house, while the rooms lay in the wings on either hand.

It was of no great antiquity, but all the more comfortable for not dating further back than the commencement of the century. The apartments were lofty and spacious both above and below; the inner hall, too, was just the thing for

an impromptu dance, or for battledore on a wet day. The park, though not very large, was the very place to laze in summer, when the weather was behaving properly: in short, altogether, Wrottsley afforded the *beau idéal* of country life, tolerably good hunting and shooting, a well-peopled, pleasant neighbourhood, and a courteous, high-bred host. But the glory of Wrottsley was its shrubberies. Shut off by a rabbit-proof wire fence from the garden, the masses of laurels, rhododendrons, azaleas, &c., are thickly populated with game. In the later spring-time, the broad green rides —walks imperfectly describe these fine velvety grass roads— are alive with pheasants, whose burnished plumage glitters in the sunlight; the rabbits skip about in that frivolous, volatile fashion to which their race seem incurably addicted, sitting up on their hind legs washing their faces, turning somersaults in their light-heartedness, pricking their ears in mock apprehension of lurking danger, and finally scuttling off in that state of fuss and bustle that seems to be their normal condition. Anon, a big hare comes lobbing down the ride with long, stealthy strides, gravely intent upon his own immediate business,—probably on this occasion the getting of his dinner; while the dying rays of the setting lord of day light up a sea of brilliant colour in the shrubberies, now glorious in the fulness of their bloom. But it is a very different scene that greets the sight this mild, muggy November morning; the trees are all bare; the flower-garden, instead of a many-hued kaleidoscope, is a cemetery of nameless graves, as the dug-up beds always appear to one in winter: the pale, wintry sun is so far unsuccessful in his efforts to struggle through the mist; and the rabbits and hares seem to think it no time of year to be about in—a circumstance which the merciless thinning they were subjected to according to annual custom, some two or three weeks back, perhaps a little contributes.

Standing on the terrace looking up the shrubberies, in earnest converse with a stout, thickset man, whose velveteen

and broad corded breeches and gaiters proclaim him a gamekeeper of the old school, is a tall, slight, well-built gentleman, with aquiline nose and clear grey eyes, who, in spite of grizzled hair and slightly furrowed brow, shows as yet no sign of decay. Just past the middle of his fifth decade, Sir Jasper's figure is still upright as a dart; and if not quite so fast through the turnips in October as he once was, nor quite so dashing a rider to hounds as of yore, his nerve is little impaired, and he is hard to beat yet at either of his favourite pursuits. If Sir Jasper passed the hot days of his youth in all that wild pandemonium that London life presented in the early days of the century, when play, profligacy, hard-drinking, cock-fighting, and the prize-ring were the chief diversions of men of fashion, yet he sickened betimes of the unhealthy life, and betook himself to the purer pastimes of the country. Gradually his visits to the metropolis became fewer and shorter, and amused him less. If his friends vote Jasper Eversley grown bucolic, and wonder if he calls those things boots, it is affectation on their part, for Eversley is as full of fun and spirits as ever he was, and he never dreamt of forsaking Hoby or having his buckskins made out of London. It was the era of top-boots and breeches, remember. But with Sir Jasper it was otherwise: the town tattle had lost its savour; he detected a recurrence of the old anecdotes that he had laughed at years ago; the hours were too late for him; he had forsworn play, and the whole thing bored him, so that when he married a pretty, thorough country girl, of country tastes, and daughter of an excellent county family, the metropolis saw but little more of him. A few weeks about Epsom and Ascot times amply sufficed for himself and his wife: but even in his country attire, in his ordinary shooting-jacket and round hat, Sir Jasper always bore the unmistakable caste of a London man.

Although attired in the roughest of shooting suits he looks a gentleman every inch of him, this November morn-

ing, as he stands there discussing with Chatterson, his head-keeper, the destruction of his remaining pheasants, with a gravity worthy of the solemnity of the occasion.

"We should have six guns by rights. The captain's coming down, and brings a foreign gentleman with him; that's two, myself three, Mr. Glanfield will be four, Mr. Wheldrake, who I dare say will be back, fifth, and the sixth —but I must see about the sixth."

"Excuse me, Sir Jasper, it'd do no harm if you slipped in a seventh. There's no depending on those furriners; they hit nothing except what they ought not to. If they kill a pheasant you can't find the pieces; they're bound to let off a woodcock, but they're death on foxes if they've a chance."

"Come, Chatterson, we've never had a foreigner here yet; what do you know about it?"

"Beg pardon, Sir Jasper. One knows a many things one's never seen. I never see a young cuckoo jerk the young hedge-sparrow out of the nest, though I've seen a young step-mother clear her step-daughters off pretty quick. I'm told these furriners are wonderful inexperienced in the use of firearms, as might be expected: they use bows and arrows in their own country, mostly, I daresay. Jeffries, Mr. Costello's keeper, told me they'd a Markee there two years ago whose bag consisted of a fox, a boy, half a pheasant, and the fragments of a rabbit. Jeffries declared he shot at everything, and might have been credited with a couple of cows, and a pig or two, if he could have held straight."

"Jeffries was yarning when he told you that story. Anyway, you know my maxim. I give my guests the best I can of everything, and I can do no more. But a sixth gun I must have, and whom to ask I can't think."

"What do you say to Parson Pilcher? He can shoot he can, Sir Jasper," exclaimed Chatterson, with all a keeper's enthusiasm and appreciation of a good shot. "Put him next that furrin gentleman and he'll have most of his birds

in the bag before the furrin gent's made up his mind to fire at 'em. He's perhaps a leetle, just a leetle, jealous, but he's a sweet shot is Mr. Pilcher—quick as lightning and deadly as nightshade."

This was old Chatterson's mild appraisement of the Rev. Bob Pilcher, as he was usually somewhat irreverently called. One of the quickest, straightest, and most jealous shots in all England; but a very keen sportsman and a most liberal man in the matter of fees, and thereby held in high esteem by Chatterson and all his race.

"Yes, I think he might do, Chatterson; I'll see about it. Meanwhile, remember we'll shoot the Bankside Hangers the day after to-morrow," and with this Sir Jasper turned to go into the house and communicate the advent of his nephew to his daughter and the party generally, none of whom had appeared when the baronet finished his morning meal.

"Yes, he's a bit jealous, Mr. Pilcher, there's no denying," muttered old Chatterson as his master disappeared. "I mind his blowing that rabbit to bits almost between his toes last year sooner than leave it to any one else."

"Good morning, father," said a tall fair-haired girl, who was dawdling over her breakfast at the head of the table as the baronet entered the dining-room. "Have you any news for us this dull morning?"

"Yes; and tell us," exclaimed a plump, vivacious brunette, about five-and-thirty, "what you propose for our amusement."

Mrs. Fullerton, the lady in question, was the widow of Sir Jasper's younger brother, and spent the greater part of her time at Wrottsley. She was a great favourite both with her brother-in-law and niece, to the latter of whom she often officiated as chaperon—a lady with plenty of life and go in her, and gossip said quite prepared to resume her chains should any eligible candidate present himself.

"Good morning to you all!" exclaimed Sir Jasper, as he

gaily saluted the company. "News, Maudie," he continued, crossing to his daughter, and kissing her. "I've great news for you, child. Fred will be down to-morrow to dinner."

"No; you don't say so," replied that young lady. "I am glad. I haven't set eyes on him for months, and he will have to give strict account of such unpardonable absence."

"Fred never troubles his head about his relations," said Mrs. Fullerton, tartly, "unless it quite suits him. I'm sure I never can get him to dine with me in town when I want him."

Fred Hammerton was not exactly the sort of man to chaperon an aunt to ball or opera from whom he had no expectations, pretty though she might be.

"Well, Clara," said Sir Jasper, always anxious to smooth over the perpetual bickering between his nephew and sister-in-law, "a young man in London with anything like a start must be a precious dull lot who doesn't find his engagement-slate pretty full. I know in my day, except by accident, you weren't likely to catch me under a fortnight."

"No, Jasper, and there were plenty of young women no doubt who would have thought the whole season not unprofitably spent in catching you. Fred's a fool. I've always thought so. A man of his age who doesn't recognise the advantage of cultivating an aunt in good London society must necessarily be wanting in *savoir vivre*."

"Quite wrong about that," said Mr. Glanfield, a man distinguished for the curtness of his remarks, and who at that moment was employed in devouring ham in the same short jerky manner he delivered his ideas. "Fred Hammerton knows the ropes as well as any one, and is not likely to be blind to Mrs. Fullerton's charms or social influence, but a man about town has a good deal to do in his way, though no one could exactly define it as hard work."

"No," replied Sir Jasper, laughing; "and yet hang me if the hardest work ever I did wasn't the pursuit of pleasure in my early manhood."

"Yes, getting about is a deal of trouble in these days; people crowd so. Seem to want to go everywhere."

"That surely doesn't affect you, Mr. Glanfield," said Mrs. Fullerton. "Whenever I meet you somebody or other's always brought you."

"Somebody's always kind to a poor waif like me," rejoined Mr. Glanfield, contemplating an egg sternly through his eye-glass as if he suspected it of too great antiquity.

"By the way, Maudie, I forgot to say there will be another room wanted," interposed Sir Jasper. "Fred is bringing a friend over with him, a Count Patroceni, whom he picked up abroad."

"Patroceni!" said Glanfield, meditatively.

"Do you know him?" inquired Mrs. Fullerton.

"No, no; I certainly don't know him, but it strikes me I've heard the name."

"He's very likely been in the country before," remarked the baronet. "Fred talks of having promised him a day at the Wrottsley pheasants, and foreigners don't take much to that sort of thing unless they have had a little training amongst us."

"I have seen some of them shoot pretty tidily," replied Glanfield. "Patroceni! Patroceni! where the deuce did I hear the name?"

"Never mind," said Mrs. Fullerton, "let us hope he will prove an acquisition. Foreigners are always so lively. By the way, I suppose he speaks English?"

"I don't think he would have fraternised with Fred if he didn't," replied Maude, laughing. "Foreign tongues Fred is not very good at."

"Do you think the Count can talk horse, Mr. Glanfield?" asked the widow, demurely.

"Of course not; foreigners never understand anything about racing."

The pursuit of this pastime seemed to be the end of Mr.

Glanfield's existence. It was not that he was an inveterate gambler—far from it; he was simply a passionate lover of the turf, and never missed any of the principal race-meetings. Such modest wagering as he indulged in never caused him a moment's uneasiness. But one curious thing about him was that he never could divest himself altogether of the taint of the racecourse. His dress was quiet enough, as also was his manner; but he could not keep the shibboleth of the betting-ring and training-stables out of his ordinary conversation. He and Mrs. Fullerton were old friends, and the widow perpetually twitted him on the subject, which he bore with the imperturbable good humour that formed one of his principal characteristics.

Nobody had ever seen Glanfield out of temper, while there were several stories afloat of his marvellous *sang froid* under trying circumstances, as well as of his eccentricities of expression. He had once characterised a pretty girl whom he honestly admired as "Good-looking, free from vice, and quiet in crinoline." It was meant as a high encomium, but the young lady was quite indignant when it came round to her ears, and only to be pacified by the assurance that it was Jim Glanfield for handsome, well-dressed, and good-tempered. Still he was a popular man, with a large and miscellaneous circle of acquaintances.

It was told of Glanfield also that in a case of an alarm of fire at a theatre he rose and cried in sonorous but deliberate tones, "Pray keep your seats, ladies and gentlemen; the carriages won't be round for half-an-hour." When complimented on his presence of mind afterwards he explained that he meant the fire-engines, and muttered something about "You know when a woman gets her best frock on what a state she gets in about a shower of rain. See 'em on an Ascot Cup day when the weather proves treacherous."

"With Wheldrake also coming back to us to-morrow we shall have the house full, and be strong enough to shoot any

of the covers," remarked Sir Jasper, as the ladies rose and dawdled out of the room in that dilatory fashion people usually do leave the breakfast-table.

"What do you think of Mr. Wheldrake, Maudie?" inquired Mrs. Fullerton, as she and her niece crossed the hall together.

"I like him," replied the girl, frankly, as the colour came slightly into her cheeks. "But why do you ask?"

"Because, my dear, I think he seems disposed to do a good deal more than like you. He strikes me as a very nice fellow, and you may go further and fare worse."

"My dear aunt, Mr. Wheldrake has never said a word of that kind."

"Fiddledee! He may not have asked you to be his wife as yet, but he has said a good many words of that kind. He may not have made up his mind to marry, but don't tell me he hasn't let you know he thinks you very nice and admires you extremely. Ah! you needn't speak. I can read that it is so in your face."

"You have no right to say such things," rejoined Maude, as she strove in vain to control her tell-tale cheeks.

"Nonsense, child, there's no harm in a young man falling in love with a young woman, even if he don't mean to marry her; but in this case I prophesy the young woman will have her fate in her own hands before many days are over." And, with a saucy nod to her niece, Mrs. Fullerton entered the morning-room, and sitting at the piano played softly the old air of "*Robert toi que j'aime.*"

Maude glanced at her aunt for a moment, and then, with a menacing gesture of her hand, left the room.

Of course she knew that Cyril Wheldrake had paid her a great deal of attention ever since she first met him at the Bottlesby ball, about six weeks ago. They had stayed in one or two country-houses together, and Maude must have been very blind if she had not observed that he lost no opportunity of throwing himself in her way. He had so far

succeeded in ingratiating himself with Sir Jasper as to have obtained an invitation to Wrottsley, from which he had just been summoned on business to his own home in an adjoining county for two or three days.

Walking up and down the terrace, lost in the enjoyment of his matutinal cigar, Mr. Glanfield stopped suddenly, and, taking his Cabana from his lips, ejaculated, for the benefit of two or three inquiring blackbirds, "Patroceni! By gad, that's the name of the Italian I saw break the bank at Monaco some five years ago."

CHAPTER III.

A RUBBER OF ÉCARTÉ.

"LET me introduce you to Count Patroceni, my dear Maude," said Hammerton, as the two men, clad in the conventional sables, entered the drawing-room just before dinner. "A gentleman who ——"

"Has suffered for Italy," interposed Patroceni, a little to his companion's astonishment, who had intended terminating his speech in a very different fashion. "Ah, mademoiselle, enjoying the blessings of a constitutional government, you cannot realise the miseries of people struggling against the yoke of despotism."

Fred Hammerton in the last few days had been educated to some extent in his friend's Protean nature, but it was with no little amazement he saw him suddenly assume the *rôle* of the exiled patriot.

"There is no mistake about his command of our tongue," thought Maude as she replied, "We are very glad, Count, to welcome you to Wrottsley, and shall do our best to make it pleasant for you."

"If a woman choose to exert herself in that fashion,"

retorted the Count with a low bow, "she can make a paradise of a sand-bank."

"My uncle, Sir Jasper, Count," said Hammerton as the baronet entered the room, his throat begirt with a high white neckcloth, that recalled the old days of the Regency, —such an one as was embalmed in the old sporting joke of "twice round and a distance." There was nothing stiff about Sir Jasper in manner, but he adhered to an old-fashioned style of dress, which suited his tall, slight, well-built figure marvellously well.

"Any friend of my nephew's, Count, is welcome at Wrottsley for his sake," said Sir Jasper, as he cordially shook hands. "Before you leave us no doubt we shall welcome you for your own."

"You are too good, Sir Jasper," Patroceni replied. "I own honestly I have a great desire for a glimpse of your country-house life—your *vie en chateau*. I have been such a puppet of fortune from my boyhood that I have rarely seen it even in my own country. Even my own place near Amalfi I have not been at for five years. Hammerton has told me you will show me a day's shooting."

"You shall have a shy at one of my best covers to-morrow, Count, and I can promise a fair show of game."

"You are very kind, Sir Jasper. Should you ever visit Naples I shall beg you to come and have a look at our woods. Stupid I'm afraid you will find it after your English shooting; but there's the scenery, the blue sky, the novelty, and the obligation you will confer upon myself," and the Count concluded his sentence with a slight bow.

"Ah, Mr. Glanfield, these foreigners read you all lessons on manners. You would never have turned so neat a compliment as that."

"Don't know, Mrs. Fullerton, what you mean by a compliment; but I could have said 'Glad to see you if you come our way' in about half the time, and with about half the

bow and scrape of Monsieur le Comte Patroceni," rejoined Glanfield, snappishly.

"It is sad to see how a sample of foreign polish excites your insular prejudices," said the widow, coquettishly.

Mr. Glanfield deigned no reply. He had no belief in foreigners, and always dimly associated their successes on the English turf with fraudulent practices. He had no specific accusation to make, but held that his country could not be beaten fairly on a racecourse, a creed stoutly maintained by our neighbours with regard to war. As Frenchmen hint at *trahison* when the tricolour succumbs on the battle-field, so Mr. Glanfield questioned the fairness of their victories at Epsom, Ascot, or Newmarket. A man of this frame of mind was not likely to welcome the alien with enthusiasm.

At this juncture the door suddenly opened, and a good-looking young fellow made his appearance.

"Just saved it, Sir Jasper!" he exclaimed; "in time for dinner after all. I did most of my dressing in the fly as I came from the station. Chisel's suggestion; he's an invaluable valet, and always boasts that he will deliver me in time for anything somehow."

"Delighted to have you back again," said the baronet, as he shook hands heartily with the new-comer. "I counted upon you to help us to shoot the Bankside Hangers to-morrow."

"I said I should be back to dinner to-day, and Chisel felt his reputation was at stake," rejoined the young man, laughing, as he turned to greet the ladies.

"Ah, Captain Hammerton and Count Patroceni, this is an unexpected pleasure. I little thought, gentlemen, when I parted from you so abruptly at Homburg, that we should foregather at Wrottsley. Indeed, I had not the honour of knowing Sir Jasper at that time, nor the slightest idea, Hammerton, that you belonged to this part of the country."

"Yes, we were rather puzzled at your precipitate retreat. You certainly couldn't think you had fallen among thieves, for we were the plundered."

"Fore George, yes! I was quite ashamed to disappear with such well-lined pockets, but I was called home very suddenly. Never mind, Count, the revenge I promised I have now the opportunity of giving, but I warn you I was born under a lucky star."

"I congratulate you, Mr. Wheldrake," said Patroceni; "it is better to be lucky than wise. The wise invest, while the lucky profit by their investments."

The announcement of dinner here put a stop to the conversation. The party was large, there being several of the neighbours present, whom it is not worth while to particularize as they play no part in this history; but Fred Hammerton was not a little disconcerted to note that Cyril Wheldrake had secured a place next to Miss Eversley, and was evidently upon very good terms with that young lady. Hammerton regarded his fair cousin as his own peculiar property; and had he not just made up his mind to assume the fetters of matrimony? Now an uneasy feeling came over him that Cyril Wheldrake might interfere with this pet project of his, and the thought shot through his brain that he had dallied too long with his opportunities; that, instead of clinching matters when he might, he had permitted a competitor to take the field, and as he ran over his adversary's cards he was fain to confess Wheldrake held a very strong hand against him. Young, good-looking, and owner of a very nice property in the adjoining county, Cyril Wheldrake was a good match for any girl, and, though Hammerton was not at all the man to undervalue himself, yet, on the other hand, he was not so foolish as to underrate his adversary.

"I had no idea you knew my cousin," said Maude, when everybody was comfortably settled in their places.

"Well, I never met him till this year at Homburg, and

had no knowledge of his relationship to yourself and Sir Jasper; didn't know indeed what part of England he belonged to. He always spoke of himself as a thorough Londoner."

"So I suppose he is, but Wrottsley's been his home for all that from his boyhood."

"Very pretty place Homburg, but queer. Have you ever been there, Miss Eversley? Everybody knows everybody, and everybody plays more or less at some game of chance or other. Respectable people who never touch a card elsewhere can't resist having a flutter on the colour at Homburg. It's a tradition of the place. I dare say they'd tell you the waters were no good to you unless you took a little *rouge et noir* or *baccarat* with them."

"Right, Mr. Wheldrake," chimed in the Count, laughing, "and the card-table is good for the patient like the waters in strict moderation. The misfortune is people can control themselves about the one and not about the other. To play to amuse oneself is good, soothing. To gamble, ah! that is to contract the fever that kills."

Mr. Glanfield put up his glasses as he listened to the Count's speech; and then, as he thought over the utterances of the man whom he had seen break the bank at Monaco, muttered, "I have seen a man give up drink, but I never saw a man give up gambling while he'd a shilling left to stake."

"We did better by having a friendly little game amongst ourselves at the club, Count, than by playing at the public tables, where the odds are avowedly against you, though I am afraid some of you must have thought me as bad as the tables. You see," he continued, turning to Maude, "I happened to be in a run of luck, and was, fortunately for me, summoned home before it had time to change."

Patroceni through dinner won golden opinions from all around him—he was so courteous and deferential in his demeanour, although it soon became evident he was a thoroughly well-informed man of the world. Upon any

general topic that cropped up the Count soon made it apparent that he was better informed than his neighbours, and he managed to do this inoffensively, a gift by no means common; the generality of mankind diffusing their superior knowledge, to say nothing of their superior ignorance, with much arrogance and patronage. Patroceni rarely boasted his knowledge of things—he had either heard so-and-so or read so-and-so, and in his imperfect mastery of a strange tongue had doubtless misunderstood what he had heard or read, and all this while speaking English with perfect ease and accuracy.

A very pleasant, clever, gentlemanly man, thought Sir Jasper, and his verdict would have been in accord with the table generally. Mr. Glanfield moodily murmured to Mrs. Fullerton that "the Count was a little too silky," to which she replied that she had noticed horse-racing was wont to imbue people with suspicion.

Patroceni was frankness itself about how he came to make Hammerton's acquaintance. "It was at the *cercle* at Homburg," he replied, in answer to a question from Sir Jasper, "after a hand of *baccarat*. I won his money, and thus cemented our friendship. We have always a kindly feeling for those whom we have worsted. I am a little like your gladiators, and always respect and regard the adversary who has worsted me. My friend Mr. Wheldrake, for example, I esteem highly, although he made quite what you call—ah!—a show of us at Homburg."

"He was very fortunate, was he not?" said the baronet.

"He was in one of those runs we often see. He could do no wrong—cards came to his call. They do to most of us, Sir Jasper, some once or twice in the game of life. Nine men out of ten miss their chance and rail at their ill-luck when they should blame their own indolence and obtuseness. It is possible to hold very big cards and be a very bad player. Most of us are," added the Count, drily.

The conversation was getting a little too epigrammatic for Sir Jasper, and he refrained from replying.

> "The more the lovers the worse the match,
> Is a fact in a woman's history,"

quoted Mrs. Fullerton, deftly.

"Good, madam," rejoined Patroceni, quickly. "I don't know who of your compatriots wrote those lines, but they are strangely true. It is the women with the best chances who mostly make the worst marriages. I improvise another stanza to it—

> "The more the kisses, the more the tears,
> Is a fact in that painful mystery."

Not quite so innocent of the author as he professed to be apparently; but the Italians have the gift of improvising, and Tom Hood's lines have a catch and a swing in them that commends itself to imitation.

"You are quite right, Count. Marriage prompted by passion is always a disappointment. It is drawing out your capital *en masse* and leaving nothing to fall back upon; the marriage of convenience is better than that. The marriage of steady regard and esteem best of all to my thinking," and the fair widow shot a rapid glance at Mr. Glanfield, at that time immersed in the investigation of a Stilton cheese and glass of Wrottsley old ale, a compound by no means to be lightly tampered with.

The woman unconscious of her good looks never existed, except in fable. The woman ever conscious of her personal charms is an everyday experience. Mrs. Fullerton was neither the one nor the other. She knew her good points thoroughly, and was quite aware that for a woman well into her seventh lustre she could bear being looked at, and Mr. Glanfield's insensibility to her attractions really was very aggravating;—all the more so because it was so evident that

Glanfield was not so much wanting in appreciation as in power to express it. To make love to a *guinea-bag* is so easy; to make love when one's heart is stricken is such a very different matter. How glib come the man of the world's compliments when his feelings are untouched! Let him be hard hit and it may be questioned whether the neophyte has not the best of him.

In the drawing-room Hammerton was no better pleased with the appearance of things than he had been at dinner. There could be no doubt that Cyril Wheldrake hung persistently about Maude, and most decidedly was far from meeting discouragement from his enchantress. Fred had, in the first instance, to do a little civility in the shape of talk to sundry of his uncle's guests whom he had known from boyhood, and if ever there was a gentleman with little relish for social sacrifice it was Captain Hammerton. Wheldrake's obvious attentions to Miss Eversley contributed not a little to increase his irritation; and when Sir Jasper finally insisted upon his making up a whist-table for the benefit of old Mr. Langridge, the deaf incumbent of the parish, the Captain's disgust knew no bounds. He was too confirmed a gambler to care much about whist at any time, but provincial whist for shilling points made him shudder to think upon. However, it was absolutely necessary that he should keep upon the best possible terms with his uncle, so there was nothing for it but to comply with as good a grace as he could assume.

The drawing-room at Wrottsley was somewhat peculiarly shaped, insomuch as at one end there was a short leg or recess to it running out upon the garden, and terminating in a bay window. The card-table was always laid out in the recess, and there many a stout rubber or pool of *écarté* had been fought out with stubborn determination. There were keen whist-players round Wrottsley of the Sarah Battle school, old-fashioned perhaps, but sticklers for "the rigour of the game," knowing nothing of the new-fangled asking for

trumps, but playing each hand rigidly out, and holding that throwing down your cards, let your hand be what it might, was foolish and contemptible. A crack player from the Arlington, who once did battle in their midst, described them as "just emancipated from long whist," and declared that a tendency to ask, "Can you one?" perpetually quivered on their lips. To a man whose palate had been vitiated by high play the homely rubber of ordinary life proved, of course, terribly insipid; and it was with inexpressible relief that Hammerton saw the evening's tournament brought to a conclusion.

Good nights are said, bedroom candles are lit, the guests depart, and the ladies troop upstairs to their pillows.

"For myself, gentlemen," said Sir Jasper, as the men gathered round the tray which contained the customary decanters and seltzer-water, "I'm off to get a good night's rest. Fred, you will take care of those who wish to smoke; only remember, all of you, Bankside Hangers is worth keeping yourselves in order for."

"Quite right, Sir Jasper, it is," responded Glanfield. "Many a good day I've had there. I shall follow your example. Good night, everyone."

Wheldrake, too, declined the seductions of tobacco, so that the Count and Hammerton were left alone in the drawing-room.

"A cigarette will be refreshing before turning in," remarked the former, as he drew a small silver case from his pocket.

"Where do we smoke?"

"We'll smoke here, Count; the Wrottsley smoking-room is a mere dog-kennel. My uncle, you see, doesn't smoke, and where that's the case the worshippers of nicotine get relegated to strange places; and, just to take the taste of that infernal rubber out of my mouth, I'll play you five games of *écarté*."

"If you like," replied Patroceni, as he lit a cigarette and

took his place at the table. "You have a goodly heritage here, my dear Hammerton," he continued, diligently sorting the packs for their game.

"I? Why I've no more interest in Wrottsley than you have. It will never come to me. Sir Jasper has not the power to leave it me if he wished. You to speak," he observed, as he dealt the cards.

"Mark the king, and play him," replied the Count.

"Oh, Wrottsley will go to Miss Eversley?"

"No. Wrottsley, at Sir Jasper's death, will go to his younger brother, an uncle of whom I know hardly anything. I'm not likely to see much of Wrottsley when he comes into it."

"Rather a bore for you to lose the run of a good country-house like this, with all the sport, &c. which you Englishmen so love. And this Mr. Wheldrake, has he a large country-house of his own? If so, it may be good for you; as, unless I am much mistaken, he is *épris* with your fair cousin."

"It looked rather like it to-night, and that is a game I cannot permit him to win at," rejoined Hammerton, sharply.

"Ah! You must take more effectual precautions, my friend, than you did at Homburg. His luck was a good deal too much for such puny efforts as yours," replied Patroceni, with a slight inflection of contempt in his voice.

"Listen, Count, I've a bigger stake on the board this time than ever I had then. Wheldrake is stepping between me and thirty thousand pounds now."

"Two games to me. I should not quite like to stand between you, or indeed between any one and thirty thousand pounds. It is so likely to be—well, let's say uncomfortable——"

Hammerton looked at his companion for a moment in an uncertain way, and then suddenly exclaimed, "I can depend upon you, Count, if I should require assistance—eh?"

"My friends can always depend upon me," rejoined Patro-

ceni, with his accustomed suavity. "A game to you. I am two to your one, but the luck's turned, and it is you who will win the rubber."

"Win the rubber? The rubber of one's life, perhaps," said Hammerton, moodily; "and Wheldrake seems to have the best of it, rather, to start with."

"Permit me to observe I do not quite follow you."

"Can't you see? I intend to marry my cousin. She will have thirty thousand pounds of her own as soon as she comes of age, an event which will take place in a few months."

The Count drew a long breath, apparently swallowed a cloud of tobacco smoke, and then leisurely emitted it from his nostrils.

"I understand," he said, at length; "you know best; but from the very little I have seen I should say you have not returned a moment too soon."

"What! You think——"

"In my humble opinion our friend Wheldrake is making strong love to your pretty cousin, and Miss Eversley is well pleased at his doing so. I never saw the man to whom thirty thousand pounds was not an attraction. In my country the man who stood between any one and it would find it a sickly season. Gun accidents are common, and I trust nothing of that sort may shock us to-morrow."

"Count!" exclaimed Hammerton, as he turned up the trump card——

"The king!" said Patroceni; "that's game and rubber to you. Time to retire, my friend. Let us trust that we shall all hold our firearms in the right direction to-morrow. Good night."

CHAPTER IV.

"SHOOTING THE HANGERS."

"MORNING, Mr. Pilcher; morning, sir," exclaimed Chatterson, addressing a slight wiry man attired in a half-clerical but very workman-like shooting costume, as he drove into the stable-yard. "It be a day for the Hangers and no mistake, beant it?"

"Yes, just one of these steamy autumn mornings that blossom into a lovely day. Birds will drive where you like this afternoon, and we ought not to let many of them off. Only show us the pheasants and there should be a good count up about four o'clock. Who's Sir Jasper got?"

"Good guns every one of 'em, bar the furrin gentleman. It ain't likely he can shoot, but I'm going to put him next you, Mr. Pilcher, and perhaps you will take care of him a bit. Never mind waiting for him, sir," and the keeper favoured the Rev. Robert with a knowing look that conveyed a good deal to the recipient, who was rarely betrayed into the weakness of waiting for his neighbour to take first turn.

"I'll do my best, Chatterson, to cover the delinquencies of those next me, but I must just go into the house and say How do? to the ladies. I suppose you're off pretty soon now?"

"Just as soon as I can get Sir Jasper to give the word. We're all ready; it's the guns is the trouble. Blest if there's ever any getting the gentlemen together."

Upon going round to the house Parson Pilcher found Sir Jasper and his party all gathered under the *porte cochère*. "Glad to see you!" exclaimed the baronet, as they shook hands. "You know everyone except Count Patroceni. Let me introduce you. Never mind going in; half the ladies are not down yet, and you'll see them all at lunch. Where the deuce is Glanfield?"

"All right, I'm here and ready," replied that gentleman. "Drop the flag as soon as you like now."

The Bankside Hangers were a series of small covers by the side of a capital trout-stream, and constituted as pretty a day's shooting as any one not an insatiable glutton could desire. The cover at which they usually wound up before luncheon was supposed to offer a pretty crucial test of a man's shooting capabilities. It was called the West Hanger, and the guns were usually ranged in two lines around the end, the crack shots artistically behind to rectify the mistakes of their less certain companions. There was a pretty little stretch of turf running down from the cover's ridge to the stream, which served well to place the shooters in the first instance, the pheasants usually flying for refuge to a little cover the other side of the brook, and afterwards did well for the *al fresco* picnic it was the custom at Wrottsley to make of the day at the Hangers.

Chatterson placed his guns round an outlying spinney in the middle of a large piece of ploughed land, where it was customary to commence, and then proceeded, with the aid of his myrmidons, to thrash it out. Parson Pilcher was placed between Mr. Glanfield and the Count, much to the former's disgust. Mr. Glanfield had more than once expressed his opinion that Parson Pilcher did not shoot quite like a gentleman. There was no doubt you could expect none of the courtesies of the field from the Rev. Bob. He stood not upon ceremony, but slew all within his reach, without reference as to whether the actual killing of the victim did not more properly appertain to his neighbour. Glanfield, a very pretty shot himself, disliked having, so to speak, to shoot on the aggressive; and yet, if you did not treat Parson Pilcher in this wise, your own bag was sure to be scanty. It was a perpetual infraction of the tenth commandment, the effort to filch your neighbour's birds.

Now Glanfield, though full of insular prejudice, and brimming over with utterly unfounded dislike of the

foreigner, was a very Arab in the way of hospitality, and could not have been discourteous to an alien except under dire provocation; therefore it was with no little disgust that he saw Parson Pilcher after his old fashion knock over a hare almost in front of the Count. Patroceni looked a little astonished and made no remark, but a minute or two afterwards, when a rocketing pheasant came sailing right over the Rev. Bob's head, which that gentleman was waiting to take most artistically, the Count's gun rang out, the bird's wings collapsed, and a ball of inanimate feathers fell almost into Parson Pilcher's mouth. A loud guffaw from Mr. Glanfield, speechless astonishment on the part of the Rev. Bob, open-eyed bewilderment from Chatterson and his subordinates, with immoveable tranquillity on the part of Patroceni, completed the tableaux.

"I'm ——," murmured Chatterson, "to think of a furriner taking a bird from Mr. Pilcher. I wonder whether he did it a puppus?"

And it was just this latter problem about which Mr. Glanfield marvelled much. Was Patroceni a very fine shot, or was this merely the result of accident? Anyway, there was the opportunity of roasting Parson Pilcher a little, a process which Glanfield knew by experience the Rev. Bob bore with undisguised irritation.

"You're getting a little slow, Pilcher," he said, pleasantly; "it's a great mistake to dwell upon your birds. You're nothing if not quick in these days."

This was preaching to the preacher with a vengeance. The idea of any one giving wrinkles to the Rev. Bob on the better management of a shot-gun! He trembled all over with wrath, and vengefully let drive at a rabbit that was scuttling across Glanfield, which pursued its way uninjured only to roll over to Glanfield's gun full a couple of seconds before Parson Pilcher let fly his second barrel.

"Don't know what's come to Mr. Pilcher," growled

Chatterson to his grinning subordinates. "He seems to 'a gone clean off his shooting."

But as the day progressed it became very evident that the killing of that rocketing pheasant had been no fluke. The Count showed himself both a quick and deadly shot, and as regards Mr. Pilcher perfectly unscrupulous about appropriating his neighbour's birds, all the more noticeable from the particular courtesy he observed to his companion on the other side. Nobody could be more keenly alive to all this than Mr. Glanfield, who did nothing but chuckle over Parson Pilcher's evident discomfiture. The Rev. Bob had most assuredly met his match, and, as is frequently the case under such circumstances, was shooting by no means up to his usual form, consequently enabling his adversary—for such the Count had now tacitly become—to obtain most decidedly the best of him. Mr. Glanfield had no yearning towards foreigners, but he cordially detested the Rev. Robert Pilcher, and expressed much satisfaction at seeing him so decidedly beaten at his own game. He quite thawed towards Count Patroceni, and was prepared to fraternise with him should occasion offer.

At last they arrived at the West Hanger, and Chatterson, although with some misgiving, placed Patroceni on the inner line with Parson Pilcher, to cover him, and bring to hand all such birds as the Count failed to stop. The ladies by this time had joined the party, and were all there to see the final rise of the harassed pheasants before lunch. All the morning the sportsmen had driven the birds before them from cover to cover, and this was the pin previous to lunch and crossing the brook.

Mr. Glanfield viewed the arrangement with the liveliest feeling of gratification. He had quite made up his mind about the foreigner's shooting, and chuckled to think that Parson Pilcher was likely to have a somewhat dull quarter of an hour taking care of what Patroceni missed. There was

a good show of pheasants, and things turned out just as Mr. Glanfield anticipated. Rocketer after rocketer reached the Rev. Bob as collapsed balls of feathers, having been artistically killed by the Count as they passed over his head, and it was only when Patroceni's barrels happened to be empty that Mr. Pilcher got the slightest chance of taking part in the slaughter. To a jealous shot, such as he was, this was simply maddening, and it was in the bitterness of his spirit that he remarked reproachfully to the head-keeper at the end of this brilliant burst—

"Well, Chatterson, I never thought you'd have served an old friend such a trick as this. It's bad enough to be put next a rattling good gun, but I can't bear a man who shoots jealous besides."

And Parson Pilcher, who would have described himself merely as keen, was really conscious of most unmerited ill-treatment. Such is the blindness we have to our own failings, for the most part.

"I must congratulate you, Count," said Mrs. Fullerton, as the men joined the ladies by the edge of the stream, preparatory to luncheon. "I don't know how you've acquitted yourself all the morning, but you undoubtedly took the lion's share of the bag at this last spinney."

"I was in luck, madame. The lion's share of the sport came in my way. It was merely that I did not neglect my opportunities; I rarely do. It is that which makes success or failure in life. I am afraid, sir," he continued, addressing the Rev. Bob, without a sign of triumph in his face, "you enjoyed few opportunities."

Mr. Glanfield buried his face in a tankard of claret-cup to hide his emotion, which from the jerking of his shoulders was apparently extreme. Parson Pilcher got perfectly purple with indignation, while Sir Jasper, laughing outright, exclaimed,

"No, Count, I wouldn't give much for *the opportunities* that come after you. If you've missed as few in life as you

have pheasants this morning you must have been a very successful man."

"I might have been, Sir Jasper, had I embarked in any other profession than the regeneration of my country. When you do that you have to depend upon many confederates. To do that is to depend upon the indiscreet, the vacillator, and the fool, as all bodies of men are leavened more or less with these elements. Pardon, madame; I only meant what a man can achieve by himself becomes so much more difficult when it requires the co-operation of others." Mrs. Fullerton did not exactly understand what the Count meant, but pictured him engaged in every description of design against the government of his country from that moment, and took quite an enthusiastic view of his character in consequence.

"I never knew you could shoot, Count," observed Hammerton as he lit his cigar after luncheon.

"I have had to learn a good many trades which people would not credit me with knowing," replied Patroceni. "Nothing teaches you to shoot quicker than your dinner depending on it, and that has been my case many a time."

His auditors rather stared, but there was no trace of bombast in the Count's manner, nor did he give any indication of being further communicative, and once more Hammerton felt a little uncomfortable about the mysterious foreigner whom he had introduced at Wrottsley. Patroceni showed no falling-off in his performance during the day, but infinitely to the demoralization of Parson Pilcher continued to be as quick, deadly, and unscrupulous to the finish, driving the Rev. Bob at length to marvelling whether it was a judgment upon him for shooting next a Roman Catholic, which was, to say the least of it, quite an assumption on his part, deduced from a hazy impression that all foreigners were. Still with everybody but Mr. Pilcher Count Patroceni continued to ingratiate himself.

There was nobody but the house-party that night at

Wrottsley; but they got on very merrily both at dinner and in the drawing-room afterwards, with one exception, and that was Hammerton. That gentleman was intensely bored. He had come down for the express purpose of arranging matters with his cousin, and to his great disgust found that young lady busily arranging matters with somebody else. Fred had for some time past voted the evenings at Wrottsley slow; indeed, they hung heavily on his hands anywhere where high play didn't enter into their composition; but this time he had a purpose in view—a purpose, too, which it was becoming an absolute necessity should be brought to a conclusion pretty quickly, and which it was transparent even to a casual observer like Patroceni he would have difficulty in bringing about. No wonder he was moody and silent, and little disposed to take part in the conversation.

When the ladies had departed, and the men were gossiping round the tray, Hammerton suddenly exclaimed "Let's have a game of cards before we turn in. Do out of charity to me. I can't sleep if I go to bed so early. Come, Wheldrake, you owe me my revenge."

"Ah, anything you like for an hour or two," rejoined Wheldrake, gaily.

"You'll join us, Count, eh, and we'll have a little baccarat."

"I always do what other people do if I can, and any one can play baccarat," replied the Count, gravely.

"And you, Mr. Glanfield?"

"Oh, I'll run," rejoined that gentleman, shortly, "if you don't make it too stiff."

"Then baccarat it is!" cried Hammerton, as he seated himself at the card-table.

CHAPTER V.

HE WANTS ME.

THERE was no immediate harm done by that night's baccarat. The stakes were not ruinous, nor were either Wheldrake or Glanfield gamblers. Hammerton undoubtedly was, while as for the Count it was difficult to say what he was. He had been known as a high player in pretty well every capital in Europe, noted for being perfectly impassive under either fortune, winning or losing with the same steady equanimity; but he always seemed indifferent to the stakes, being apparently quite as contented to play for moderate sums as not. He most distinctly interposed once when Hammerton suggested heightening the interest, saying that they were playing for amusement, not battling in earnest, and when the evening tournament terminated he and Glanfield rose losers.

But what came about was this; the baccarat became a nightly affair. Hammerton invariably proposed it; Wheldrake, as a winner—for his Homburg luck seemed to stick to him—could only acquiesce, and the others joined in—Glanfield because it did rather amuse him, and Patroceni because, as he said, he always did as other people did. In one thing the Count was somewhat unlike the other inmates of Wrottsley—he was addicted to early rising, and, with the exception of Sir Jasper, none of them could be accused of that failing. He was strolling along the terrace one morning in enjoyment of his eternal cigarette—for Patroceni was an almost ceaseless smoker, when he heard voices in Sir Jasper's study which arrested his attention, and caused him to pause and listen. He distinguished the tones of Jackson, the butler, and in another moment had caught his words.

"It's not right, Sir Jasper, it can't be right, and I'm bound to tell you about it. The young gentlemen, you know, will have a game at cards before they go to bed. Young gentle-

men will, and, what's more, I don't believe they exactly play for sugar-plums. They never did at Wrottsley as far as my memory goes, nor in yours either, Sir Jasper."

Old Jackson was right in his conjecture. Given one thorough gambler in a coterie, and, whatever the stakes may be to start with, play is certain to get high if they continue, and so it had been at Wrottsley. The modest stakes with which they had commenced no longer contented them.

"They will play this new game, backrat, I'm told it's called," continued the old man in his measured, deliberate manner. "I play a tidy hand at 'all fours' myself, and I ain't very bad at cribbage neither."

"Now, if you've got anything to say, Jackson, say it at once. I'll take your skill at all fours and cribbage for granted."

"I've been with you, Sir Jasper, man and boy, for a matter of thirty years, and if an old servant can't speak ——"

"I've excellent reason to know he can," interposed the baronet, testily. "Never mind the thirty years, let us pass over that period. Come to what you've to say at once."

"You know, Sir Jasper, I'm just as much concerned about things going wrong at Wrottsley as you can be," replied Jackson, in a wounded voice. "What I've got to say is this. These gentlemen play this backrat with two packs of cards of the same pattern, mixed, and I happened to sort these two packs myself this morning. The great card, they tell me, in this game is nine, and it don't want much of a card-player to know there's eight nines in two packs of cards. Now, how many nines should you say I found in those two packs of cards? Thirteen, Sir Jasper; there were thirteen nines—thirteen nines! There must be something wrong, I take it."

"Nonsense, Jackson," said the baronet, sharply; "you must be mistaken—impossible. Do you know what you're saying? Do you know this amounts to stating that I have a swindler, a cheat, an unmitigated scoundrel amongst my guests?"

"No, Sir Jasper, I'm not mistaken," replied the butler, doggedly.

"I never join these games, but to-night I'll sit up and look on. Not a syllable to any one, mind. Remember, if there should be any truth in your discovery, the quieter the affair is kept the better."

"You know best, Sir Jasper, but in my opinion a fellow who sits down to pick his friends' pockets at a game of cards ought to be kicked out of the house; and,——though I'm getting old, I'd do it myself."

"A fine, old family servant!" muttered the Count; "quite useless, utterly incorruptible, and an intense nuisance. *He will* do it; what a fool he is! I warned him at Homburg that a child might detect him, and how he escaped exposure there I can't conceive. It was not likely Messieurs Glanfield and Wheldrake would find him out, but I—bah, of course, I see it every night. My dear Hammerton, you are much too clumsy with your fingers to succeed as a *chevalier d'industrie*." With which reflection Patroceni resumed his walk.

"It seems almost incredible," murmured Sir Jasper, as Jackson left the room, "that I should have among my friends one who would condescend to unfair play. Yet I've seen too much of the world not to know, when one would least expect it, the taint crops up. However, I'll see for myself to-night. I'll look on at their game a bit."

There was to be no shooting that day at Wrottsley. Maude had got up a dance for the evening, to which many of their immediate neighbours were bidden. It was not a ball, but a small, and it was hoped would prove a lively, dance. Miss Eversley had persuaded her father that the men would be fitter for the duties of the evening if they were left to their own devices during the day, instead of being placed under the orders of old Chatterson; and so it had been resolved to give the dogs and keepers a holiday. Patroceni turned the thing over in his mind for some time.

Of course he knew that his friend Hammerton cheated at cards; he had detected him at Homburg; and that was what had given him his real hold over the luckless Fred. He had come to him one day after Hammerton had won some considerable sum at cards from him the previous evening, and their conversation, if brief, had been to the point. The Count had relentlessly threatened exposure unless his losings were promptly returned, and demonstrated his capability of proving his case. Fred Hammerton blustered at first, but quailed before Patroceni's steady determination at last, and made restitution, thereby tacitly admitting the justice of the Count's accusation.

"It is no use, Captain Hammerton," said Patroceni, "my advising you to let tampering with the cards alone in future. Experience teaches me that when a man has once or twice done it successfully no warning will save him from his inevitable doom. You are not the stuff of which the finished *écroc* is made!—and how rarely does he fail sooner or later to come to grief! And you come here amongst all the practised gamblers of Europe to attempt your common-place ruses. Anything more ill-advised I never heard of. Nothing but the chance of your having played with a lot of babes and sucklings at the *cercle* could have saved you from detection long since."

Fred Hammerton thanked the Count, and swore he would never yield to such temptation again, but the desire to neutralise, if not get the better of, Wheldrake's extraordinary luck had proved too much for him at Wrottsley as it had at Homburg,

But the Count had no idea of Hammerton getting into trouble in this wise. The blasting of Hammerton's social reputation would be to take a very useful card out of his, Patroceni's, hand, and the Count had no notion of that. What use it was to be to him he had at present no idea, but Patroceni was not the man to waste a trump, even if a small

one. Clear to him, at all events, Hammerton must have warning of this conversation.

The opportunity came in the billiard-room during the morning, where, at the Count's suggestion, Hammerton found himself doing battle in a game of a hundred up. At the French cannon game Patroceni took a deal of beating, but he was by no means so at home in the English game, and Hammerton was quite his match.

"I think, my friend, I would be a little sparing in the use of those *nines* to-night, if we play. The bucolic mind is slow to rouse, but pig-headed when it does arrive at an idea. From something I overheard this morning," continued the Count, as he slowly chalked his cue, "I fancy our host seems to have an idea."

"Do you mean," replied Hammerton, with visible trepidation, "that—that—my uncle thinks I play baccarat rather better than my neighbours ?"

"I fancy that he and the family butler have arrived at the conclusion there is a little hanky-panky going on at the card-table."

"No matter," exclaimed Hammerton, defiantly, "I'll play those nines to-night again, but in very different fashion. He does not know it, but Cyril Wheldrake has stepped between me and thirty thousand pounds. He has had the audacity to fall in love with my cousin Maude."

"And, judging from appearances, she with him," rejoined Patroceni, as he made an elaborate cannon.

"It has always, as I have told you, Count, been my intention—not particularly to marry her; but—most decidedly to marry her thirty thousand pounds. You understand?"

"I understand that she is a very charming girl, and that, to speak mataphorically, you are a little late for the train."

"Not bad looking," rejoined Hammerton, bitterly. "She represents the discount on the transaction. Now, you can hardly suppose that I am going to let Wheldrake, or, for the

matter of that, a dozen Wheldrakes, stand between me and thirty thousand pounds."

"My dear friend, I've the greatest regard for you and the highest admiration for your amiable disposition, but, as I told you before, I should not like to stand between you and thirty thousand pounds."

"It is getting high time to settle Wheldrake, and, if possible, it must be done to-night. I shall want your assistance. Listen, my friend: the first time he lands us all at baccarat, and I exclaim, 'By heavens! Wheldrake, there's no playing against your luck,' you will accuse him of unfair play."

"But, my dear Hammerton, although I hold all to be fair in love as in war, and will assist you to the extent of my power, I can't accuse a man without some grounds. Such a charge as this unsubstantiated would simply ruin me not him, and it is his social destruction you would bring about."

"Certainly. You have called me clumsy with the cards, Count; only help me do what I ask, and see how I shall play them to-night. Remember, I never had a bigger stake on."

"Depend upon me, I will not forget my cue, nor be slow to help you whenever I see the opportunity; but remember this, to ruin a girl's lover is not the way to win her good graces."

"I'm not quite so dull as you deem me, Count. Wait till you see my scheme executed. Game!" he continued, as he made a scientific losing hazard into the top pocket; "and now I'm off to write letters."

"Hum!" mused Patroceni, as his companion left the room. "I've not much faith in Hammerton's powers of intrigue, but I'll take care of myself; and, if there are any chestnuts to be picked out of the imbroglio, it is not Hammerton who will get them," and then the Count proceeded to knock the balls about till luncheon time.

But old Jackson was by no means the only intruder in Sir Jasper's sanctum that morning. A good deal later,

indeed about the time Hammerton and Patroceni were playing the above recorded game of billiards, Miss Eversley suddenly made her appearance in a somewhat flustered and embarrassed state, but for all that she had a bright blush upon her cheeks—she bore a happy smile upon her lips.

"Papa, dear, I want to speak to you," said the young lady, as she sat down.

"Well, Maude, what is it? Anything of importance?"

"Of the greatest importance. I want to know if I may keep this ring."

"Why, who gave it you?" inquired Sir Jasper, as he glanced at the half-hoop of pearls and diamonds held up for his inspection.

"Cyril Wheldrake. And I should so like to keep it."

"A very pretty ring, and I see no particular objection," rejoined the baronet, laughing. "By-the-way, Maude, he don't ask for anything in exchange, eh?"

"Now don't be aggravating. Of course you know he does. He wants me."

"So Cyril Wheldrake has asked you to marry him. Well, my dear, I can't say I was altogether unprepared for this. He's a man of property, and a fine straightforward young fellow to boot. My dear Maude, I give my consent heartily, and my warmest congratulations to boot;" and the baronet took his daughter in his arms and kissed her heartily. At this moment the door opened, and Mrs. Fullerton made her appearance.

"Oh, dear, what is the meaning of this display of affection?" exclaimed the widow. "I come, Jasper, about a man to put up the sconces for to-night. What, tears, Maude! What is the matter? Yes! I do believe Mr. Wheldrake has found his tongue at last. What did he say, child? He must have been rehearsing his speech the last three weeks. It's like reading yesterday's paper."

"Girls must be wooed, Clara. All women must be won," rejoined the baronet.

"Yes, but in these days of telegraphs and railways we expect it to be done in somewhat quicker fashion. When *they* have made up their minds to endow us with all their worldly goods they needn't travel by goods train to do it."

"You've no right to say such things, auntie. If Cyril had wooed in such slap-dash manner he might have had No for an answer——"

"Never mind, my dear, perhaps I'm thinking of my own affairs. We don't all dance to the same step. Anyway, Maude, you've my best wishes for your future happiness."

"Well, Clara, you'd better educate a young man up to your own standard. A young fascinating widow, you've heaps of admirers. Take one of 'em in hand and let's see a model young man of your breaking-in. Try Glanfield for instance——"

"Ah," said Maude, laughing, "aunt is taking great pains with Mr. Glanfield, though not quite in that direction."

"Don't be irreverent," retorted Mrs. Fullerton, with mock solemnity. "Everybody has a mission in these days. Mine is to protest against the slang of the day. Mr. Glanfield is much improved already by my animadversions on his disgraceful abuse of the language of his country." With this remark and a peal of laughter the widow swept out of the room.

"Does she mean marrying him, Maude?"

"That's very difficult to prophesy about, papa. It's very hard to tell when auntie's in earnest; and then remember Mr. Glanfield is by no means an emotional man. He is a little struck with auntie, no doubt; but whether anything will ever come of it I'm sure I can't say, though I think they would suit each other capitally. And oh, here's Cyril," and as she spoke the door opened and Wheldrake entered the room.

"My dear Sir Jasper, Maude has told you all. Will you let her keep the ring I have given her? Will you trust me with her for life?"

"There is no one to whose charge I would more willingly confide her. She's a good girl, Cyril, and I honestly believe will make you a good wife. Your father and I were staunch friends. May you both be happy!"

CHAPTER VI.

"PLAYING THE NINES."

THE news of Maude's engagement speedily permeated the house; such news ever travels quick in country neighbourhoods, where small events assume proportions of much greater magnitude than they do in cities. The stone that creates a perfect storm in the pool, thrown into the torrent is hardly noticed. All Wrottsley knew before the evening that Mr. Wheldrake was engaged to be married to Miss Eversley. There was no need to keep the matter a secret, nor was there the slightest pretence made of doing so—indeed, Mrs. Fullerton would have suffered severely had she been called on to exercise such repression. Never had Maude looked prettier or brighter than she did this evening, as she received the congratulations of her friends. That those of the men should come latest was but natural; the male creature is usually slow to understand love-making in which he is not concerned, nor does he deem a girl's engagement of quite the same importance it always assumes in a woman's eyes. She recognises that the step is taken irrevocably which makes or mars her future should that engagement be carried out; that her life-long happiness or misery are sealed in that quarter-of-an-hour that consigns her to the keeping of a stranger. He wakes to that a great deal later, and little dreams how it may influence his destiny. He is not, however, risking his all upon the event; the woman is.

"Love is of man's life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence."

A lottery in which there are perhaps nearly as many blanks as prizes. Two people covenant to live together for life, only to find they are living with somebody else, and that they have not in the least married the person they thought they had. The seamy side of the character has been carefully concealed on either side up to the steps of the altar.

"By Jove, you know," said Mr. Glanfield, as with Mrs. Fullerton on his arm he left the hall at the end of a valse, and entered the drawing-room, "sort of thing this that knocks one quite over. Wonderful fellow, Wheldrake; enters himself for one of the best stakes of the year, makes all the running, and wins in a canter."

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind putting that into English, Mr. Glanfield," rejoined the widow, suavely.

"Beg pardon, Mrs. Fullerton, I quite forgot. I mean, you know—well, I mean that he cut out the other fellows; and that he made love to Maude and won her, while the other men were only thinking about it."

"Why don't you take a leaf out of his book, Mr. Glanfield? we women don't dislike a little audacity on the part of a lover."

"No, of course not. Admire a fellow that goes a regular perisher, right off. But won't you sit down?"

"A regular perisher!"

"I apologise!" exclaimed Glanfield, hastily. "I mean that falls in love no end at once. Awful difficult work," he muttered, as he seated himself beside Mrs. Fullerton on the ottoman, "talking to these women—their knowledge of English is so limited."

"Who is this Count Patroceni?"

"I don't know. Hammerton picked him up somewhere abroad. Homburg, I believe, and I fancy has promised to give him a start in London society—not very difficult in these days. A croupier from Monte Carlo, with decent manners and well-cut coat, and an introduction or two, would make his way."

"Yes; what constitutes intense vulgarity in our own country is voted so interesting in foreigners. Not that the Count is vulgar; his manners are really courtly."

"He's all bow and scrape; but he's not a bad sort for a foreigner. He can shoot; and the way he took the change out of Parson Pilcher that day at the Hangers was simply delicious. But I don't think I'd try him too high."

"Try him too high, Mr. Glanfield!"

"Excuse me, it's a racing expression. I mean, ask too much of him."

"You really are insufferable. Racing again," she muttered half audibly; "I declare the man thinks of nothing else."

"Well, I can't help it," he replied, in answer to her half-uttered thought; "there are times when I regret I ever took to it, but there's a fascination ——"

"Ah, Mr. Glanfield," interrupted the widow, "you can't think how delighted I am to hear you say so. I am sure if you would turn the great abilities you possess to the study of higher things you would be certain to ——"

"No, nonsense; do you really think so?" cried Glanfield, excitedly. "I will—I will—I'll go in a regular buster. I can't ride, and I hate hunting, but I'll take a pack of hounds."

"That's his idea of higher things," murmured the widow to herself. "Oh, these men, these men! You don't quite understand me, Mr. Glanfield," she continued aloud. "You might almost as well remain constant to that wretched Racing Calendar."

"Come, I say, don't speak disrespectfully of the Racing Calendar. Where should we be without it?"

"He's very dense," thought Mrs. Fullerton; "but, fortunately, I am very patient and have plenty of time to spare." But here that lady's further manœuvres were interrupted by her hand being claimed for the Lancers, and Mr. Glanfield was spared further insidious assault for the present. Still his assailant was a woman of energy,

who had made up her mind that he would *suit* her, and, to use his own language, he had not a hundred-to-one chance of escape, did he but know it.

"It strikes me, my dear friend," said Patroceni, as he and Hammerton lounged into the dining-room in pursuit of some refreshment, "that, as I remarked before, you're a little late. Wheldrake has won the game while you've been shuffling the cards."

"One game does not make a rubber, Count. Only let luck favour me, and you shall see us ties before the night is over."

"Should I see that, I shall feel interested in watching who wins the trick," rejoined the Count, as he filled a glass of champagne. "To your good fortune, *mon ami*. Have you made your felicitations on the auspicious event?"

"Not yet," rejoined Hammerton, with a sinister sneer. "I must, as a matter of course, though there will be small subject of congratulation, if I know anything of my uncle, by this time to-morrow."

The music rang out its merriest, and never had Maude felt in higher spirits than as she whirled round the old hall in her lover's arms, to the strains of the Manola valses. She was feeling all that elation which is so often the presage of disaster. The storm-clouds often gather in succession to those very gay mornings, and a delirium of spirits often terminates in a delirium of grief. There is much wisdom in that old Scotch expression of a person being *fey*.

"Mine at last, Maude!" said Wheldrake, as he bore his fair partner through the opening into the drawing-room for a minute or two's rest, "and let me plead for an early day. You have never seen Italy, and I must show you Rome, Florence, Naples, and the buried cities. How often we have talked over Pompeii."

"Oh, that will be delightful! I shall so enjoy a wander through Italy. Let us make quite a long tour of it, Cyril."

"You must not quite forget the old home, Maude," broke in Sir Jasper, who had overheard his daughter's speech.

"Nor you, Cyril. One of the first flight mustn't be absent from the country when bridles are ringing and bits champing. Whatever comes, you promise to be home for Christmas."

"Trust me for that, Sir Jasper. Ah, Hammerton," he continued, as that gentleman approached with an evident smile of congratulation on his face. "You have heard of my good fortune. I know we both have your good wishes."

"I have just come to offer them. Shake hands, Wheldrake. In the flush of victory have a kindly feeling for the beaten man."

"What do you mean, Fred?" cried Maude, in open-eyed bewilderment.

"Nothing, nothing," replied her cousin. "If I cherished dreams ——. My dear Maude, may you be happy; and for your sake I trust, as I believe, that the best man has won," and Hammerton retired abruptly, with a rather conspicuous use of his pocket-handkerchief.

"It is incomprehensible," exclaimed the girl. "What can he mean? He never spoke a word to me but such as a cousin well might."

"No matter if he did, sweet," rejoined her lover. "If at all events it never dawned upon him that he loved you until he realised that he had lost you, I just now can sympathise with him in the bitterness of his disappointment."

"This won't do, Mr. Wheldrake. It won't indeed," cried Mrs. Fullerton, who at that moment entered the room. "You must pardon my interrupting you, but it's well-known that, from the moment a girl's engaged till the day she's married, she belongs to *every one* but her *fiancé*. He, as Mr. Glanfield would say, 'takes a back seat.' We can spare you, Maude, no longer. I'm dying to see the ring, *the ring*, you know, and so are half-a-dozen young women, who will have a sleepless night should their curiosity remain ungratified."

"I yield, Mrs. Fullerton," replied Wheldrake, laughing, as he resigned his place on the ottoman to the widow.

"Don't abuse my poor bauble if you can help it. I know it is not worthy of her any more than I am."

"There's a mock humility about that speech that augurs ill for your future, my dear," remarked Mrs. Fullerton, with that serio-comic gravity that was one of her greatest attractions, and they were many, as Cyril left them. "No, Maude, don't pout or show temper, but show me the ring."

"Temper, auntie," rejoined the girl, laughing. "I'm in love with all the world to-night, and the happiest girl in England; there's my ring, is it not a beauty?"

"It is pretty," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton.

"It's lovely; it's quite too delicious," exclaimed one or two young ladies who had accompanied the widow from the hall with all that enthusiasm about greeting the conqueror that always characterises the sex, albeit mingled with a *soupçon* of jealousy, when first welcoming one of themselves who has returned triumphant from the war-path, and then the ring was passed from hand to hand, eliciting various expressions of commendation and approval.

"Mr. Wheldrake, I am told I may tender my good wishes," observed Patroceni, as he ran against the young man in the hall. "You will renounce the card-table now; men drop it when they marry—at least for the honeymoon."

"Thanks, Count, I never was much of a gambler. When I play it is simply out of good fellowship or to pass the time, and I take care I do not pay too dearly for my amusement."

"I'm a physiognomist," rejoined Patroceni. "You have the face of one of fortune's favourites, Mr. Wheldrake. It is men like yourself, indifferent to winning, who break banks. I shall be curious to see how the capricious goddess treats you to-night, should we play."

"To-night!" exclaimed Cyril. "Why my star is in the ascendant. Have I not won the prize I set my heart on? Surely, Count, you have not forgotten the old play-axiom, 'Follow your luck.' I shall simply ruin you all."

"Perhaps so; but there is another old adage, 'Lucky in love, unlucky at cards.' I repeat I shall be anxious to see whether you falsify it."

But the revel draws to a close, the carriages come round, and, with many protestations of what a delightful dance it has been, the guests take their departure. Old Jackson closes the supper-room, and the house-party gather round a table in the drawing-room which has done duty all night as a supernumerary buffet. This table stood near the recess in which preparations for cards had been made as usual.

"You won't desert us to-night, Wheldrake? We count upon you to make up our party," said Hammerton, as he restlessly fingered the cards. "Besides, you owe us our revenge."

"All right, Hammerton," rejoined Wheldrake, as he crossed to the card-table. "Five minutes, and, as soon as the ladies have gone, I'm your man; and here's my gage," and as he spoke he threw his note-case on the green cloth, and then turned back to the buffet, where much lighting of bedroom-candles and judicious mingling of seltzer, &c., was in progress.

"Did you see Miss Eversley's betrothal ring, Mr. Glanfield? It is simply delicious," said the widow.

"I never heard a ring called delicious before. Would you be kind enough to ——"

"Yes, I'll take anything with ice in it," interrupted the widow, tartly. "I believe the man's a fool," muttered Mrs. Fullerton to herself.

"Nice looking, very; got her good points. But uncertain in temper," murmured Mr. Glanfield, softly.

But Sir Jasper, in the fulness of his heart, was suddenly inspired with a speech. The country gentleman is not usually great in his oratorical efforts. Sir Jasper's had one merit—it was brief.

"My friends, you all know what has happened—that my girl has accepted Cyril Wheldrake for her husband. I want

you, before we say good-night, to drink one glass of champagne to their future happiness. Champagne, Jackson! Here's luck and prosperity to the newly-engaged pair."

During Sir Jasper's speech, and the subsequent hand-shaking and congratulations, the Count, at a whisper and gesture from Hammerton, stepped forward, and so to a great extent masked the card-table at which the former stood. Quick as thought, Hammerton seized the note-case and promptly slipped into it some of those surreptitious cards which it was his miserable madness to use when playing.

"The twig is limed!" he whispered; "don't forget your cue, Count. Here, give me a glass. Maude, I drink to your health—and happiness."

"A bright, merry wedding, my dear, and don't keep us long ere you set the bells ringing," said Mrs. Fullerton, as she raised her glass to her lips.

"You are all so kind; how can I thank you?" replied Maude, in a half-tearful voice. "I must leave Cyril to do it. Good night, everyone!" and so saying the heroine of the evening hastily made her exit.

The ladies troop off to bed; Wheldrake and Glanfield follow them out of the room and linger over these last good nights.

"Fortune has favoured me more than I could hope," exclaimed Hammerton, excitedly. "Don't forget your cue, Count; and, strange though it sound, let Wheldrake win but *once* to-night, and he gets up from the table a ruined man."

"You are clever, my friend," replied Patroceni; "I shall await the result of your little comedy with much interest."

"Ah! here you are, Wheldrake," cried Hammerton, as Cyril and Glanfield re-entered the room. "Come and give us our revenge."

"Willingly, but, as I told you before, so I warn you again, it is my day."

"An imprudent statement," said Patroceni; "*take* revenge,

but never *give* it. If ever you *should* break the bank at Monaco, remember my advice: instead of letting them take revenge take a ticket yourself for the next train."

"Against a public bank, yes," said Sir Jasper; "but the advice hardly applies to gentlemen."

"Of course not, uncle," replied Hammerton; "the Count's advice only applies to a public gaming-table," and without further comment he commenced dealing the cards. "You to bank, Wheldrake."

They had not been playing more than half-an-hour before the door was stealthily opened, and Maude peeped into the room. "My ring," she murmured. "I cannot sleep without it on my finger. Auntie says she left it on the table. I would not have Cyril know I had been so careless for the world."

Old Jackson and his myrmidons had put out most of the lights in the drawing-room before retiring, leaving only those which lit up the recess. Stealthily Maude crept across the semi-obscurity to the small table near the ottoman, where she at once regained her treasure. She was about to retire as noiselessly as she entered when her cousin's voice at the card-table arrested her attention.

"By Jove, Wheldrake, there is no playing against your confounded luck," cried Fred Hammerton, petulantly.

"Will Mr. Wheldrake permit me to observe he drew a card—of course, inadvertently—from his case with that last bank-note?" remarked Patroceni, suavely.

"Sir, do you know what you are saying?" said Cyril, fiercely.

"A mistake, no doubt," rejoined the Count, quietly.

"Do you dare to accuse me of cheating?" said Wheldrake, as he sprang to his feet.

"An accident, of course, but an awkward one, signor?"

"Sir, I throw the accusation back in your teeth. I produced no card, and you know it," exclaimed Cyril, furiously.

"Absurd, Count, your eyes must have deceived you!"

cried Hammerton, starting up and placing his hand on Cyril's note-case.

"Put that down immediately. How dare you lay hands on my property, Captain Hammerton?"

"Pray be calm, Wheldrake; I am doing the very best I can for you. You surely can have no objection to my emptying your note-case on the table."

"As if any one who knows Cyril Wheldrake could possibly suspect him of anything so shameful!" cried Glanfield, in tones of honest indignation.

"My eyes are good. I have played in most capitals of Europe," rejoined the Count, in the blandest of voices, and with no symptom of irritation, "and learnt to my cost how fortune can be assisted——"

"Silence, gentlemen!" suddenly interposed Sir Jasper, who had been a silent looker-on at the vicissitudes of the card-table. "Cyril, I am distressed beyond measure that any guest of mine should venture to bring such an accusation against you. Fred," he continued, turning to Hammerton, "Count Patroceni is a friend of yours. You are responsible for his presence here. I need scarcely say that nothing but the most substantial proofs can make any of us believe this charge against Cyril Wheldrake."

Maude, who had listened spell-bound and breathless to the altercation, stole forward at her father's words. She had gathered enough to know that her lover was accused of foul play by that foreign friend of Fred's, and she inwardly blessed her father for thus taking up the cudgels in Cyril's behalf.

"For Heaven's sake be calm, Wheldrake!" exclaimed Glanfield, laying his hand upon the excited man's arm. "We will kick the fellow out of the house in two minutes."

"Empty the case," was Patroceni's sole retort.

By this the whole party were on their feet, with the exception of the Count, who still remained seated, calm and

immovable. All eyes were turned upon Hammerton as he turned out the notes, and, to the horror and amazement of Cyril, Glanfield, and Sir Jasper, three cards with them.

"Sir Jasper, Glanfield, you can't believe ——"

"Liar, was I?" said Patroceni, in sneering tones; "I think not, Mr. Wheldrake; there are three witnesses against you."

"Look at that man!" exclaimed Cyril, as he pointed his finger at the Count. "What object he, whom to my knowledge I never injured, has in plotting my downfall I can't guess. I cannot form a conjecture, but so surely as I stand before you this night, a ruined and disgraced man, so surely am I the victim of treachery. I can hardly hope that any one present will believe my innocence."

Suddenly, like a flash of light, Maude darted out of the obscurity, threw her arms round her lover, and cried, "I would stake my life on your innocence, Cyril!"

"Heaven bless you for that, my darling. I am the victim of a deep-laid plot; but, believe me, Maude, I am as worthy to be your husband now as when I won consent from your sweet lips some hours ago."

"It is time this painful scene was put an end to," said Sir Jasper. "After what has happened you cannot, as a man of honour, hold my daughter to her troth."

"And do you think I would be released from it?" cried Maude, proudly. "Only this morning I promised to marry Cyril. Do you suppose I will abandon him at sight of the first trouble that clouds our sky?"

"No; whilst this stain rests on my character I'll make no girl my wife."

"Oh, Cyril, my love, my love, you are not going to leave me!" moaned Maude, in her agony.

"Yes, dearest; I'll not drag you through the mire that lies before me. Do you think I could see you pointed at as a card-sharper's wife? I go forth from amongst you to-night

a wanderer and an outcast, but the plot will some day be unmasked, and that foreign adventurer seen in his true colours at last."

"Count Patroceni is my friend, sir," interposed Hammerton, hotly.

"I congratulate you on the acquaintance. Good-bye, Sir Jasper. Adieu, my love!" and as he spoke he handed the half-fainting girl over to her father. "The game, gentlemen, is not played out as yet. Listen. Like all gamblers you are superstitious. I have a presentiment. We shall play once more, our lives the stake, and it will be my turn to win!"

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER THE EXPLOSION.

For a minute or two after Wheldrake's departure there was dead silence round the card-table, broken only by Maude's slightly hysterical sobs.

"Get some water, Glanfield, please," said Sir Jasper, as he supported his half-fainting daughter in his arms; "and as soon as she has drunk a little of that I must get her to bed. It's too horrible! I couldn't have believed it of Cyril Wheldrake."

"And don't now," rejoined Glanfield, as he handed a tumbler to Maude.

The girl said nothing, but thanked him with a look as she took the glass, but Sir Jasper's sole response was a sorrowful shake of the head. A few minutes more, and, after swallowing a few mouthfuls of water, Maude was enabled, with the assistance of her father's arm, to leave the room.

The three men stood for a few seconds silently regarding each other. Patroceni was the first to speak.

"Adieu, gentlemen!" he said in his blandest manner. "It

is an unfortunate business; and after the part I have played it is of course impossible for me to remain at Wrottsley. I shall leave early to-morrow morning. I must trust to you, Hammerton, to say my good-bye to Sir Jasper, and to thank him for his courtesy and hospitality. Good night!" and the Count, taking up his bedroom-candle, bowed slightly, and disappeared.

"Bad business, very," said Hammerton, as he prepared to follow Patroceni's example.

"It will be most decidedly bad for your foreign friend whenever I get at the rights of it," replied Glanfield, drily.

"The rights of it, or rather the wrongs of it, were, I regret to say, only too clear," rejoined Hammerton, sharply. "You are prejudiced against foreigners, but you could hardly expect Patroceni to remain silent when he discovered the source of Wheldrake's extraordinary luck, though had he dreamt of Maude being in the room I feel sure he would have continued to suffer in silence."

"Listen to me," retorted Glanfield, as he looked his companion straight in the face. "I've seen a good many robberies on the turf that I didn't understand, but I knew they were robberies. I've seen what they can do with cards at the Egyptian Hall, and I don't hold that 'seeing is believing.' How it was done and why it was done I don't know. What your friend's object was I can't fathom, but that Cyril Wheldrake has never cheated at cards I feel certain."

"Do you mean to insinuate that Count Patroceni ——"

"Stop a moment," interrupted Glanfield. "I never insinuate, and I don't bring accusations against a man's honour till I'm in a position to prove them. I only tell you my firm conviction, as you were present. I don't intend opening my mouth on the subject to any one else. Good-night."

Hammerton took a turn or two up and down the room, then walked to the buffet and mixed himself a pretty stiff

dose of brandy and water. He had not been very particular for some time past, but such a shameful piece of villainy as he had this night committed he had never as yet even dreamt of. As he had been spoiled, so had he turned spoiler, and had for some months past resorted to malpractices at the card-table. Differing from Shakespeare on the point, he deemed that "it *was* in mortals to command success," and saw no necessity for deserving it. Still, a man does not own to himself that he has turned a consummate scoundrel without some pricks of conscience, and, what is more, feeling terrible misgivings when he knows that another is in full possession of his guilty secret. Hammerton, now the thing was done, became conscious that he had placed himself dreadfully in Patroceni's hands. Well, he had got rid of a rival, he reflected, at any rate; it would be for him now to make the most of his opportunity and take care that no one else stepped between him and his cousin. He was a fool not to have clenched matters before. He would strike now as soon as ever sufficient time had been allowed her to get over this affair with Wheldrake. Hammerton had slight belief in woman's constancy, and fancied Maude would speedily teach herself to forget her disgraced lover; still he knew he had a difficult game to play. It was very possible that Maude—even if she allowed Wheldrake to be erased from her memory—might not set up his—Hammerton's—image in its place; but, thought the captain, as he gulped down his brandy and water, it is not difficult to so compromise a girl on the subject of marriage as to make it very difficult for her to back out when put to the point.

There were gaps in the ranks at breakfast-time the next morning, which, though not at first perceptible, in consequence of the laxity regarding that meal which generally characterised the inmates of Wrottsley, eventually attracted the sharp eyes of Mrs. Fullerton. Sir Jasper was not there; that was nothing, he had usually finished his meal before the fair widow made her appearance; but both the Count

and Maude were absent; Glanfield and Hammerton were unusually silent over their meal, and the latter announced that, business requiring his presence in town immediately he was compelled to leave by the mid-day train. Mrs. Fullerton scented mischief in the air; there was a screw loose somewhere she felt convinced. What was it? The widow was not the woman to rest in ignorance on such a question as this. Mr. Glanfield must be made to confess. Of course, he was privy to the iniquity that had broken up the party; for that there had been an *esclandre* of some kind Mrs. Fullerton felt pretty positive. The sudden disappearance of Patroceni, the undisguised uneasiness of Hammerton and Glanfield, convinced the widow something unpleasant had taken place.

"And are you going to desert us?" said Mrs. Fullerton, softly. "What a sad break-up of a pleasant party."

"Yes. I am entered for the mid-day train, and am a certain starter," rejoined Glanfield.

"Which, being interpreted," remarked the widow, "means, as far as I can follow your extraordinary *patois*, that you accompany Captain Hammerton to London."

"It so happens that we are going to London by the same train," retorted Glanfield, curtly, "but I am not accompanying Captain Hammerton."

"I thought so," murmured Mrs. Fullerton to herself. "There has been a quarrel of some sort amongst them. Where are Mr. Wheldrake and Count Patroceni?" she continued, aloud.

"They both left, I presume, by the morning train," replied Glanfield, with a malicious smile; "we go by the midday train. The others, no doubt, will follow by the evening mail."

"What others?" exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton. But a twinkle in the speaker's eye suddenly informed her of the real state of the case, and it was with the most righteous indignation that she cried, "You are jesting with me, Mr. Glanfield!

You can't deceive me! There *has* been a misunderstanding, and I insist upon knowing all about it."

"I have nothing to tell," replied Glanfield, quietly, "or, if you like it better, regret that I cannot satisfy your curiosity. I am quite willing to admit, Mrs. Fullerton, that something *has* happened, and fear that far too many people are cognizant of the occurrence for it to be long a secret. I shall be only too happy to find myself mistaken."

The grave manner in which Mr. Glanfield said this, together with the utter absence of the *argot* with which he was wont to embellish his speech, struck Mrs. Fullerton forcibly. She not only felt that something had occurred, but that it was a shell of some magnitude that had exploded amongst the party. She had Mr. Glanfield all to herself, the two being now the sole occupants of the breakfast-room; but there was a set look about her companion's face that forbade further questioning, and checked the ever-ready tongue of the light-hearted widow.

Before he left, Glanfield made his way to Sir Jasper's sanctum, nominally to say good-bye, but in reality to request him to suspend his judgment. No loyaler friend in his trouble had Cyril Wheldrake than Mr. Glanfield. It was all no use; in vain did Glanfield insist upon his favourite theory that "seeing is *not* believing" in these days of science and chicanery; Sir Jasper was inflexible. He held steadily to the one point, that with his own eyes—sad to say—he had seen Cyril Wheldrake convicted of cheating at cards, and that no man with such a stain on his escutcheon should ever wed daughter of his. It was useless for Mr. Glanfield to urge that vision may be deceived; to hint that the foreigner, for some occult reason of his own, had blasted Wheldrake's fair fame. Sir Jasper, like the honest country gentleman that he was, put aside all such high-flown argument.

"It is loyal of you, Glanfield, to stand by him, but I cannot doubt the evidence of my own eyes. It was the saddest evening of my life when I had to acknowledge my

girl's lover a simple card-sharper. God forgive Cyril Wheldrake—not for the night he occasioned me to pass, but for the agony he caused my daughter. Caused!" cried the baronet, fiercely. "Caused! still causes! Maude is crushed, broken-hearted; to think that any daughter of mine should have her happiness wrecked by such a cur."

"Wheldrake is no cur, sir, and he is no cheat. The day will come when this deception will be exposed, and you yourself will be the first to acknowledge how very hardly he has been treated. Good-bye, Sir Jasper. I sympathise most sincerely with you and Miss Eversley in your trouble, but I also sympathise with Cyril, who, in spite of appearances, I feel convinced is an innocent man."

But Sir Jasper only shook his head as he bade Glanfield farewell. He was sorely distressed at what had happened, both on his daughter's account and that of her *fiancé*. It was not only the terrible blow and humiliation this entailed upon Maude, but he grieved to think that a fine young fellow like Wheldrake should have so hopelessly blasted his name and forfeited his position. He had seen one or two such cases before, and knew that a man never got over such a fatal charge as that of which Cyril stood convicted.

As for Mr. Glanfield, he was only too correct in his surmise. Before the evening Mrs. Fullerton, and indeed the house generally, were aware that there had been a great *fracas* at the card-table; that Mr. Wheldrake had been detected cheating, and had been denounced by Count Patroceni; that all the gentlemen had gone to town; that Mr. Wheldrake had called the Count out; that a duel had been arranged, and that the four gentlemen were all on their way to the Continent. How this had all leaked out it was impossible to say. Old Jackson, who was by no means without the weakness of garrulity, had probably given the key-note; but these things always do leak out. There never was a family quarrel yet but the domestics were acquainted with all the details of it, and in discussing it are

wont to weave their own embellishments into the telling of the story. So in this case it was most likely the opinion of some bellicose footman that Mr. Wheldrake ought to challenge the Count, and he, therefore, did not hesitate to state that Mr. Wheldrake had done so, after which the adjournment of the four gentlemen to the Continent followed as a matter of course.

Mrs. Fullerton, as soon as the garbled version of the affair reached her ears, went at once to Sir Jasper. She was a shrewd woman, and, without believing the story quite as related to her by her maid, had no doubt that it was in the main true, but she wished to know exactly what did take place. She was much distressed on her niece's account, for she felt sure this was an offence of that nature her brother would be pitiless in dealing with. She knew well that anything of this description was a crime of the deepest possible dye in his estimation, and felt sure that he would never give his daughter to a man lying under such a stigma, and she knew that this would bring much misery to Maude. Mrs. Fullerton knew also that her niece's was no half-hearted love, that the girl was of a warm affectionate disposition, and that no man before Wheldrake had ever ensnared her feelings. She was not the girl to love lightly, but, having once parted with her heart, was sure to be very earnest in her love. Mrs. Fullerton was quite aware that it would take Maude a very long time to pluck up the roots of her strong attachment for Cyril Wheldrake. Sir Jasper, finding how much his sister did know, at once made her acquainted with the whole story, and also that everything was over between Maude and her luckless *fiancé*.

"It's a miserable business, Clara, and I would willingly for both their sakes have hushed the thing up had it been possible, but you yourself are evidence that the story is already common property. Besides, how are we to account for an engagement made one day and broken off the next? It's terrible; I have hardly proposed health and prosperity to the young couple before I am compelled to turn my in-

tended son-in-law out of the house. We have had barely time to tell people there is a wedding in prospect before we are obliged to deny it. Such a fine young fellow, too! What madness possessed him?"

"It is inexplicable," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton. "He's the last man I should ever have suspected of anything mean or underhand. Still, you say Mr. Glanfield believes in him?"

"Yes; Glanfield, in his loyal friendship to Cyril, refuses to believe the evidence of his senses. But don't build upon that, Clara, and, above all, don't let Maude know it."

"Mr. Glanfield is no fool, although he does go racing," replied Mrs. Fullerton, musingly; "and, to use one of his own absurd expressions, 'straight as a line.'"

"I thought you were to teach him to drop slang. It strikes me he's corrupting you," retorted Sir Jasper, with a smile.

"I don't think," continued Mrs. Fullerton, without noticing the interruption, "that he would stand up for a friend even, if he considered him in the wrong."

"His friendship closes his eyes to facts."

"I can't give you any reason for it, but I shouldn't wonder if Mr. Glanfield turned out to be right."

"Don't delude yourself with the idea, and pray don't put it into Maude's head."

"Oh, dear, it wants no putting there. Why, you don't suppose, Jasper, you can make her believe that Mr. Wheldrake is guilty. No; you can forbid her to marry him, and I suppose you must, under the circumstances, but you can't make her believe that her lover has done anything wrong. A girl takes a good deal of convincing on that point, even when the man himself is doing his best to make her mistrust him. She will feel it very much, Jasper. You have no idea how very much attached to him she is."

"I wish to Heaven she had never seen him," replied the baronet, irritably, to which Mrs. Fullerton deigned no reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE COUNT NAMES HIS PRICE."

Could Hammerton have been made acquainted with Patroceni's reflections on his way to town he might well have had misgivings about having placed himself so completely in the Count's power. That gentleman was indeed turning over in his own mind how to exact the most for the very questionable service he had rendered his friend. "It is not to be supposed," mused the Count, "that I am to lose the *entrée* of a capital country-house—for, of course, I shall never again be asked to Wrottsley, and be the chief instrument in blasting the character of a man against whom I have no cause of quarrel—for nothing. I'm not at all particular, but it can't be supposed that one assists in such very dirty work as this for nothing. My friend Hammerton, you will find that, though an able, I am a somewhat expensive, coadjutor. The great question is—What can you afford to pay in either money or kind. I must think, my dear friend; I must think."

The result of the Count's cogitations was that the next day Hammerton received a visit at his rooms in the Albany from Patroceni.

"I wonder what brings him here," muttered the Captain, as he glanced at the Count's card; "and what it is he wants to see me for? Show the gentleman in, William. Ah, Count, this is an unexpected pleasure. Charmed to see you; looked forward to meeting you to-night at the Harlequin."

"I could not resist the temptation of congratulating you on the success of your little comedy."

"Well, Count!" cried Hammerton, exultingly, "I told you I should score the second game. What do you say now to my tactics? I was sorry to sacrifice Wheldrake—a fine young fellow with a nice fortune—in the prime of early manhood. He would have been worth a good many hun-

dreds to you and me, and but little the worse for losing a few of his quill-feathers. However, the fool must needs fall in love and come between me and thirty thousand pounds."

"Ah! you have disposed of him. As a foreigner, perhaps, I do not understand your world; but if this thing is known, talked about, I presume Mr. Wheldrake is socially ruined?"

"Yes. I don't mean to appear in it, but I shall take care it is known. His club will request him to resign. They must. The customs of society are much the same throughout Europe, and the whispers of club-land travel far. Wheldrake is socially ruined."

"It is clever, very clever, my dear friend. You have, undoubtedly, disposed of a favoured rival, but, mark me, degrading a lover in a woman's sight never yet recommended a man to her good graces."

"Oh, fie, Count; our foggy island has bemused your brains. My work is not so clumsily done as that. Why did I make you my confederate? Don't you see that in Maude's eyes it is you who exposed her lover. Don't you see that Glanfield and Wheldrake regard the treachery they suspect, but cannot understand, as yours?"

"You are right; I am dull. Forgive me, my friend; I overlooked that little circumstance. Is it permitted to ask what is your next move?"

"Certainly, Count," replied Hammerton, as he pushed a cigarette-case across the table to Patroceni. "It is very simple: I appear everywhere with my uncle and cousin. In a short time I flood the Society papers with paragraphs: 'We understand that a marriage has been arranged.' 'We are authorised to state that Captain Hammerton will shortly lead to the hymeneal altar Maude, only daughter of Sir Jasper Eversley,' &c. &c. You comprehend: before the girl knows where she is she will be compromised in the eyes of the world. I am congratulated. Of course I deny there is any truth in it, but in such a way as means it is not officially announced; and, Count, you and I know that a woman,

smarting under such a disappointment as my cousin's, has been often won in such fashion."

"Clever, yes, decidedly clever; your scheme, my friend, is very ingenious; permit me to point out one flaw in it."

"Certainly," rejoined Hammerton, eagerly; "any suggestion of yours I shall be only too glad to take advantage of."

The Count threw himself back in his chair, emitted a thin cloud of smoke from under his moustache, and then said, quietly, "You don't seem to have considered me."

"You!" replied Hammerton, in utter bewilderment. "I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"Ah! it is you now, my dear Hammerton, who are a little dense," rejoined the Count, smiling. "My excellent friend, to assist you to win the hand of a charming girl with thirty thousand pounds (seven hundred and fifty thousand francs) I submit to figure in the most atrocious light in her eyes and those of another worthy gentleman or two."

"Nothing of the sort, Count," interposed Hammerton, hurriedly. "You expose a cardsharper. Society is your debtor."

"My conscience, sir. The degradation of lending myself to such a fraud. Is that not matter for compensation?" replied Patroceni.

"Oh! that's your game, is it?" rejoined Hammerton, roughly. "Never mind your conscience and feelings. Name your price."

"A question of figures," said the Count, calmly, and as he spoke he checked the items off on his fingers. "Five per cent. on thirty thousand pounds down—hum, that's 1,500*l.*; five per cent. again the week before the marriage, that's 1,500*l.* more, and a bill for a third 1,500*l.* at the end of six months; total, 4,500*l.* Dirt cheap for such obloquy as I must bear."

"Never mind the latter part of your story," rejoined Hammerton, brusquely. "We know each other a little too well for that. The price is too stiff, Count."

"Probably the other side would give more," rejoined Patroceni, as he flipped the ash off his cigarette. "Mr. Wheldrake would think five thousand little to clear his reputation, and win the girl he loves with her thirty thousand pounds. I daresay he would give ten. Don't be stupid, my dear Hammerton. Robbery in West End clubs, with West End manners, is exactly the same thing as robbery without the polish; and, human nature being precisely the same in high and low, the spoilers are just as liable to quarrel over the plunder."

"Curse your moralizing!" rejoined the Captain, sullenly. "Say two thousand pounds the week before the marriage, and have done with it."

"You are too impatient, my friend, to be a good business man," remarked Patroceni, blandly; "but when I say I must have four thousand, at least, or change sides, you will understand it is advisable to give it."

"I see nothing of the kind. Brag is a great game, but I am an old hand at it. Two I will give you, and no more."

"I never argue about such bagatelles as a couple of thousand pounds," replied the Count, with all the air of a millionnaire, to whom such a sum was but as loose change. "If I don't get it one way I do another."

Hammerton made no immediate reply to Patroceni's last speech. It dawned upon him in good earnest now that he was in the hands of as rank a bandit as ever sprang from the tribes. The quiet relentless power of the Count's nature awed him. He felt that Shylock was demanding his pound of flesh, and realised his inability to cope with Shylock. Yet he possessed one argument which must prove irresistible, and Patroceni already had a suspicion of this. Hammerton could plead with perfect truth inability to comply with the first clause in his antagonist's bond. It was a suspicion of this that had caused Patroceni to lower his claim by 500*l*. He suspected his dear friend Hammerton might have considerable difficulty in finding that

ready money for which he at first stipulated, and this had caused him to think that perhaps a thousand pounds was as much as could be wrung from him at present. As for the rest, it was all contingent upon his engagement with Maude Eversley. Should Hammerton succeed in that venture he would experience but little difficulty in raising the two remaining sums. But Hammerton, although he was endeavouring to drive a hard bargain, was, of course, aware that, ere it could be concluded, the first clause must be cancelled—his finding a thousand pounds was simply a sheer impossibility.

"Absurd, Count!" he answered at last. "I will give you a thousand pounds down the week before I am married, and a bill for another thousand at three months. That's the most I can or will do!"

"And that is your final offer?" said the Count, as he rose and proceeded leisurely to draw on his gloves.

Hammerton nodded.

"I will give you a week to amend it, and then I go to the other side."

"No you won't, Count!" cried Hammerton, harshly. "I should think even you would shrink from voluntarily proclaiming yourself such a consummate scoundrel!"

"Monsieur ——" exclaimed Patroceni, sharply.

"Pooh, Count, there is no need to mince matters between you and me. We may speak plainly to one another. You expose me and you place me in the precise position I have placed Wheldrake in if people believe you—but you will stand in the dock by my side. Either way you will ruin yourself, believed or not believed. It is possible people may take the word of a well-known London man before that of a foreigner of whom they know nothing. I should have thought a thousand pounds extra a dear price to pay for having such a scandal tacked to one's name."

"And yet," returned the impassible Patroceni, "that is precisely what you decline to pay to avert it."

Hammerton bit his lips with vexation to find how his eloquence had been wasted. The quiet way in which, after listening to his long exposition of the case, the Count turned the tables upon him, was exasperating. He recognised that he was battling with an astuter brain and more inflexible will than his own.

Patroceni stood calmly awaiting his reply.

"There is this difference," rejoined Hammerton, after a little thought, "I shall have to find a thousand pounds. You have only to forego it."

"I congratulate you upon even seeing that far beyond your nose; but that, you see, happens to be your business. You pay attention while I state the case to you. I am a man not given to render services for nothing. For holding my tongue at Homburg and assisting you in this last little comedy—upon which, by-the-bye, I once more compliment you—I intend to be paid. This marriage may never come off, in which case I should receive nothing. Decidedly, my friend, I do not mean to leave England without replenishing my purse."

Hammerton eyed the Count keenly.

"Then your estates are mere *chateaux en Espagne*," he remarked bitterly, at length.

"The first time you are in the neighbourhood of Naples I invite you to come and see me in the character of a country gentleman. I will give you a week to think of it, or, as we are speaking plainly, a week to raise the thousand pounds. For the present, adieu!" and with a polite bow Patroceni took his departure.

Hammerton threw himself back in his chair and became absorbed in thought. He had no compunction about what he had done; it had become such a necessity that he should marry money, and that speedily, that he was prepared to go any lengths to achieve his purpose; indeed he had already proved himself utterly devoid of scruple about the means by which he was to attain his end. He regretted deeply

that he was so much in Patroceni's power; but the more he thought of it the more convinced he was that he could not have successfully carried out his plot without the assistance of an adroit confederate. The presence of Maude had been unfortunate in some wise, as it had afforded her the opportunity of hearing her lover protest his innocence in person instead of by letter, as would otherwise have been the case. But then, on the other hand, his cousin stood convinced by the evidence of her own eyes that it was not he who had brought the accusation against Wheldrake—indeed he could argue plausibly enough that he had taken his part and done his best to disprove the shameful charge brought by Patroceni. What was he to do? As for raising the thousand pounds demanded by Patroceni, that was not worth thinking about, and yet the bare idea of exposure made him shudder. All at once a gleam of light flashed across him. If his friend the Count was so resolute to take ready money home with him why did he hesitate to go at once to Wheldrake? It was obvious he could command better terms from him and be assured of a considerable sum of money at once, as Cyril was not likely to bargain much about the price of clearing his good name. Why then did a man, utterly unscrupulous as Patroceni had shown himself, not take his goods to the best market? It could be only for one reason. Let him say what he liked, the Count was no more desirous of an exposure than he was; and, if that was the case, well then he could well afford to stand by his terms and abide the issue. Hammerton had made up his mind. The week passed and he made no sign.

Now the Captain very much under-estimated the Count's abilities when he came to the conclusion that Patroceni could not denounce him without denouncing himself. To a man of the Count's calibre that was nothing. He knew of course that Hammerton was tampering with the cards at Wrottsley, and looked on in an amused way at the Captain's clumsy manipulation, perfectly transparent to an adept like Patro-

ceni. He was quite aware of Hammerton's method, and knew that it was essential that one of the servants should be his confederate. It did not take long for a shrewd man of the world like the Count to discover which. Ere he left Wrottsley Patroceni had possessed himself of the man's name and address, and knew where to lay his hands upon him at any time. The Count flattered himself that, should it suit him to sell his information to Wheldrake, it would be possible to keep himself very much in the background, and figure as a man only too anxious to repair a gross injustice that he had been guilty of.

It is a pretty game of brag between two as unprincipled men as ever preyed upon society, and that two human lives ran every chance of wrecking for the gratification of their rapacity troubled them not a whit.

Patroceni, clever as he was, happened to be the first to discover a flaw in his game. When, as the week drew near to a close, he found he heard nothing from Hammerton, he thought it high time to hunt out Wheldrake's address. There was not much trouble in discovering that. Five minutes' study of the Blue Book at the Harlequin told him it; and further inquiry at the address told him, to his dismay, that Wheldrake had gone abroad. That this was excessively awkward Patroceni could not but admit to himself in homely language, much in vogue with the money-lender of the metropolis, "It's impossible to do business with a gentleman you can't see." It is no use having a secret to sell when the one man to whom it is worth selling is not forthcoming. Patroceni knew from experience that proud, sensitive natures, crushed beneath such a disaster as had befallen Wheldrake, were wont to hurry to the Continent and bury themselves in obscure travel. He realised the fact as soon as he called at his rooms and was told that their master had gone abroad and left no address. It might be many months, nay, years, before he again crossed Wheldrake's path, and consequently the Count came to the conclusion that he would do well to

drive the best bargain he could with his esteemed friend Hammerton. "There would not be much difficulty about that," murmured the Count to himself, smiling, "but for one thing: my dear friend Hammerton is at present most lamentably destitute of money."

CHAPTER IX.

OSTRACISED.

After hurling his presentiment at the head of his adversary, Wheldrake went straight up to his room; he was fairly stunned by the blow that had befallen him. It was enough to crush most men. In all the pride and exultation of success in having won the hand of the girl he loved, with pulses still throbbing at the warm-hearted congratulations of his friends on his approaching happiness, he was suddenly stricken to the dust. A thunderbolt launched by the hand of the stranger had stricken him, and left him dishonoured and disgraced. Already he realised his terrible position. A man of the world, he saw clearly what had happened to him. He knew that this scandal would not be confined to Wrottsley. There were far too many people aware of the shame cast upon him to admit of that. He knew well how such stories as his flew round the gossiping-halls of club-land. Yes: the story of his shame would be all over London before the week was out. He was innocent, but who would believe it? True, Glanfield had declared that he held him guiltless, but then Glanfield was a loyal and thorough friend. Could he himself have acquitted a man placed in his position? No; it meant ruin, and nothing else. One chance only remained to him. He knew that he was the victim of a conspiracy, and there was a possibility that some day the story of that conspiracy might come to light. One

thing was clear, he must leave Wrottsley at once, and rising from his chair he rang the bell.

It had been a night of high revel at Wrottsley, and Mr. Jackson and the upper-crust of the servants' hall had by no means finished toasting the young couple. At the sound of his master's bell, Chisel sprang to his feet and hastened to answer the summons. An excellent servant was Chisel. No order whatever could have disturbed his serenity. He would have obeyed it rapidly, implicitly, and without questioning, but it would have been a great mistake to doubt Chisel's shrewdness on that account. If he said nothing, he probably knew more about his master's affairs than any man living, not excepting his lawyer. But the valet could not help opening his eyes a little as he received his master's orders.

"Put me out a shooting-suit, fill my cigar-case, and be ready to let me out in a quarter of an hour. I am going to walk across to Bottlesby and catch the night-mail, which comes through at four in the morning. Ten minutes to two," he continued, looking at his watch; "I have plenty of time to do it. You will pack up my traps and follow by the first train in the morning."

"Very good, sir," replied Chisel; and proceeded without further remark to carry out his orders and assist his master in dressing.

After letting him out of the house, Chisel proceeded downstairs, and, though ordinarily silent about Wheldrake's affairs, thought there was no harm in mentioning that he, Chisel, was going away by the first train in the morning; upon which it transpired that the servant of Captain Hammerton had received similar orders, and that Count Patroceni had also desired to be called in time for that train.

Old Jackson opened his eyes to their fullest extent when he heard all these particulars. "Ah!" he said, "there's been games going on about that backrat business no end.

If young gentlemen want a quiet hand of cards, well and good—there's 'all-fours,' 'cribbage,' and 'whist,' games as takes a deal of playing, and over which it is possible to win or lose a deal of money. These young men have been a going it, as far as stakes are concerned; and mind what I tell you—it's ended in a row, a devil of a row. I don't know the rights of it, but there ain't thirteen nines in two packs of cards ——" and here Mr. Jackson favoured the company with a vinous wink.

"Nobody could have possibly suggested that," said Mr. Chisel, quietly. "What a ripping hand of cards you do play, Mr. Jackson, we all know. That our masters are pretty ignorant on such matters we all know also, but Heaven help their stupidity; they must know eight nines go to two packs."

"Perhaps so, and perhaps not," rejoined old Jackson, pursing up his lips with the air of a man who could say a good deal if he liked. "Anyway, there was some on 'em playing there who didn't understand how many nines there were to a pack, I'll go bail."

"What do you mean, sir?" inquired Wheldrake's valet.

"Never mind, Mr. Chisel; never mind, sir. I know what I mean, sir. What is not to be tackled by young men like you is all as clear as a trout-stream in summer to a man of my experience."

"And your opinion, Mr. Jackson, is ——?" inquired the adroit Chisel, keenly curious to get at the solution of the embroglio.

"That it's time to go to bed," replied Jackson, with that intense gravity that at times endues the quaffer of beakers; "especially for young men who've got to call their masters early." And, rising from his presidential chair, Mr. Jackson proceeded to light his candle, and warbling, with clumsy facetiousness, in a cracked falsetto, "If you're waking call me early—call me early, mother dear," the confidential butler betook himself to his couch.

Like many another wrongfully accused, Wheldrake shrank from contact with his fellows; he shunned his friends and carefully avoided his clubs. He thought that every one he met must know the miserable story of that night at Wrottsley, and in some measure he was right; for, thanks to Hammerton's exertions, the tale had travelled fast and far. He brooded sullenly over the disgrace that had befallen him. He took a more morbid view of what he told himself was his wretched life every day. A strictly honourable man, the slur cast upon him attained larger proportions hour by hour. He was approaching that frame of mind which sees no solution of its troubles but the grave, and strong men at such times lay sacrilegious hands upon that life God has given them. "It's about over with me," he thought; "and, only I hold with the old Roman philosopher that the suicide is like the cowardly sentinel who abandons his post, I'd make an end of it before the sun goes down. But no; I must face my doom, as better men have done before me. There's one chance, darkness may be turned into light. I cannot help thinking that, in spite of appearances, Hammerton was privy to Patroceni's infamous accusation. Let me think. Ah! I remember, I threw my note-case on the table, and left it there some ten minutes or so before we sat down to cards. It was possible to tamper with it, no doubt, though hazardous; but what motive could either of the men have in branding me a cardsharper? Surely, for men addicted to play like themselves, it was more to their interest that I should continue to test my luck than be ostracised from all play. Could they deem that marriage would make me give up all that sort of thing? Did marriage always interpose a bar to the gambler? Not a whit, if fiction or fact can be relied on. Far from having crippled myself, my luck has borne me through triumphantly so far. If I have been no source of profit to these men, whom I met for the first time at Homburg, that surely must be the sole grudge they can have against me. But practised gamblers like

Patroceni never complain when fortune goes against them. Moreover, they always cling to the idea of taking their revenge, and that is not to be obtained from a man whom they have virtually disqualified from ever touching a card again."

He turned to his letters with a weary sigh, and the first he opened stabbed him like a knife. It was from the committee of one of his clubs, telling him of the disgraceful story in circulation, and calling upon him at once to deny it *in toto*, or, at all events, submit some explanation of the affair for their consideration, adding that they refused to credit it, yet, as custodians of the club's honour, they had no alternative but to ask him if there was any shadow of truth in the tale, and to request his version of the affair. It was but what he had pictured to himself, and yet this was, so to speak, the first official notice he had received of being tabooed—the first solemn declaration that society had thrust him from among them. Very clear that England was no place for him for many a day. Where was he to go? Such a story as his would stick to a man all over the Continent. He must avoid all beaten tracks, and, above all, association with his fellows. Henceforth his travel must be as isolated as that of the Hebrew wanderer, condemned to roam the earth for ever in expiation of the betrayal of his Master.

Well, this letter had to be replied to; it was of course but the forerunner of others of similar import, and what was he to say? Nothing. Affirm his innocence in the face of the clear proof of his guilt? Sir Jasper, a mere looker-on, who had welcomed him as a son-in-law but a few hours before, and was moreover an upright, honourable gentleman, held him guilty. Except Glanfield, where would he find another to believe in his innocence? Once more he sighed wearily in the bitterness of his spirit as he realised all that Patroceni and Hammerton—for the more he brooded over it the more he associated the two—had brought upon him, and then he sat down to write the sole answer possible,

that "on his honour he was innocent, and was unable to account for the cards found in his note-case." He felt it was the lamest of refutations to a serious charge ever penned, but he could not better it. Men always did, in defiance of all proof to the contrary, deny cheating at cards, and the negative was always received with contemptuous incredulity.

He was right: as the first bill about Christmas time heralds the avalanche, so was this notice. That Cyril Wheldrake's explanation of the terrible story tacked to his name had been eminently unsatisfactory to the committee of the Blenheim flashed like electricity round club-land, and some two or three more of these institutions to which Cyril was affiliated lost no time in exacting similar explanations. The result was that Wheldrake was requested to withdraw from the first-named, and that his other clubs would follow the example thus set them hardly admitted of a doubt. He determined to forestal them, and at once sent in his resignation to all such monachal institutions as bore his name on their books, accompanied by a vigorous protest of his innocence of the crime laid to his charge. That done there remained nothing for him but to conclude his preparations for leaving England and then depart.

He had seen none of his old associates since leaving Wrottsley. He did not know for certain, but could only conjecture, that his name and his shame were in all men's mouths. Two days more and he should be gone, when suddenly Chisel announced that Mr. Glanfield wished to see him, and, in answer to his master's morose "Not at home," simply threw open the door and admitted that gentleman.

"My dear Cyril, how are you?" inquired Mr. Glanfield, as he shook hands, and without waiting for further welcome threw himself into an arm-chair.

Staunchly as Glanfield had taken his part, Wheldrake was not a little disconcerted at his appearance. He frowned angrily at Chisel, to whom his orders had been peremptory

and precise on the subject of "Not at home to any one." But Chisel gazed vaguely in another direction. The valet was sincerely attached to his master. He had, as we know by this, a fairly accurate idea of what did take place that evening at Wrottsley. He was quite as sceptical as ever Mr. Glanfield could be of Wheldrake's guilt in the affair. One thing he did see, that his master was gnawing his heart out, and the man's common sense told him that it would be good for Wheldrake to have a long talk with any friend he could thoroughly rely upon. This was the third time Glanfield had called; on the first occasion Chisel had implicitly adhered to his master's orders, on the second Wheldrake had really been out, but this time Chisel had unbosomed himself.

"I am told to say 'Not at home,'" he replied in answer to Glanfield's inquiry; "but Mr. Wheldrake is upstairs, and in my opinion it is high time you or some other of his friends saw him, sir. It's no use my pretending I don't know there was a rumpus at Wrottsley. It isn't likely I shouldn't have heard of it, but this I do know, that it has knocked my master clean over. He wants some one, Mr. Glanfield, just to pull him together and put his head straight." Chisel was a man of the world, and prided himself on adapting his conversation to his auditor. To Glanfield he talked horse; to a bishop he would improvise some mongrel imitation of "Paley's Evidences." Glanfield looked upon him as a sharp fellow with a considerable knowledge of racing. He knew nothing whatever about it. His master considered him the best valet in England, with a dash of Leporello about him. He was a man of immaculate virtue. Shrewd and quick-witted, Chisel, after the manner of his class, was up to a certain point an excellent servant; pass that, and like his brethren he had the makings of an intolerably bad master.

"I did not mean to see any one," replied Wheldrake, with a faint smile, "but I am glad to have the chance of saying

good-bye to you. I leave England the day after to-morrow. Nay, I have no choice," he continued, in answer to a gesture of dissent on Glanfield's part; "England has already left me. The Blenheim have requested me to resign; not a man of my acquaintance but would cut me in the streets, and I—I dare not resent it. One is not obliged to know cardsharpers."

"Don't talk like that, Cyril. I know well enough you would never bolt out of the course. How that accursed bit of juggling was managed at Wrottsley I don't quite know, but jugglery it was, I'll swear. We shall come at the truth of it some day, and find out why that smooth-tongued Count desired to ruin you. Now, old man, I want to talk seriously to you. To go abroad is, I think, just at present the best thing you can do. Once you are out of the way it is very probable Patroceni will show his hand, and I shall discover what object there was in forcing you to leave the country, for that must have been the object of the shameful combination against you. Can you recall to mind anything that happened at Homburg that might account for such a dastardly vengeance?"

"Nothing," rejoined Cyril. "Why the thing was done, I can't tell; but the how it was done I think I can account for. Just before Sir Jasper proposed my health and Maude's I threw my note-case on the table. While I was replying, saying 'Good night,' and so on, there was an opportunity for tampering with the note-case—for introducing the cards that ruined me."

"That's the clue, Cyril; that's all I want!" cried Glanfield, quite startled out of his usual apathy. "That's what puzzled me—how did they do it? Now I see how it could be done, I have no doubt that was the way it was done. Never you fear, but I'll get at it at last. I've unravelled a robbery or two in my time that looked quite as incomprehensible to start with. The motive of robbery is usually money; in your case it would be either that or revenge.

You say you have done nothing to call forth the latter, therefore it must be the former; though how they are to make money out of disgracing you at present beats me. But, remember, I shall watch them like a lynx. They can't make money out of this plant without my discovering it; and, though it's quite possible they may be some months before they attempt to trade on their treachery, sooner or later they will try to realise. I shall get at it all then. In the meanwhile, trust me to watch over your interests, and don't lose faith in me if you chance to hear I'm on intimate terms with Hammerton and Patroceni. Good-bye, Cyril, and God bless you. Go abroad is my advice, and don't leave an address behind you, except with me."

"You are right!" rejoined Wheldrake. "I shall not even take Chisel with me to begin upon. Address, I can't even give you at present, but I will write to you at the Blenheim."

"Good-bye," rejoined Glanfield, and, with a mighty hand-grip, the two men parted, little thinking where the baccarat party were next to foregather, nor dreaming of the game at which they were destined to play.

CHAPTER X.

"WILL YOU BE OUR GUIDE?"

Mrs. Fullerton was right. Maude was thoroughly prostrated by the disaster that had overtaken her. The rapid rupture of an engagement just announced, and for such a cause, would be a bitter blow to any girl's pride, but, with her affections seriously involved besides, it was terrible. Like her lover, she also shrank from her friends and acquaintances. She could not bear the idea of being pointed at as "that Miss Eversley, who was engaged to the fellow who was found with the cards up his sleeve, don't you

know." She firmly believed in Cyril's innocence, but she had heard from his own lips that he despaired of proving it. She could see no gleam of light in the future. She was a proud girl, and had carried her head high, but now the sunny tresses were, to speak metaphorically, trailing in the dust. Even her father seemed to lose heart, and have no courage to hold up his head amongst his fellows, in face of the great misfortune that had come upon him.

Like wildfire spread the hideous scandal; and people, from the amiable motive of not intruding upon the Eversleys in their trouble, shunned Wrottsley as if the small-pox raged within its walls. Maude fancied, as is given to mortals to do under such circumstances, that the very servants regarded her with pity: that the story was current through the house she, of course, knew only too well, and all this was gall and wormwood to a girl like Maude. Curiously enough, that card-table story acted on Sir Jasper and his daughter precisely as it had done upon Cyril Wheldrake. Although not quite so quickly, like him they made up their minds to leave England for a while. Commiseration in one's grief, although balm to some natures, is as nitric acid poured into the gaping wound to others. Sir Jasper and Maude were of the kind that fly to the desert when stricken to the death, and suffer in silence rather than moan over the misery that has come to them. Others there are, no doubt—weak, foolish, uncontained natures—who find much relief in unbosoming themselves to every sympathetic stranger they come across. It may be hard upon the stranger, but it seems to afford them much consolation.

And so it came to pass, that, about the time Wheldrake set forth on his pilgrimage, the Eversleys, too, meditated foreign travel, with no more idea of to what parts than Cyril himself. In both cases it was the flying from great sorrow; and, despite the Horatian maxim, that black care sits ever behind the horseman, it is something to escape from the friends who pity us.

If Patroceni was considerably taken aback at the discovery that Wheldrake had left the country, he was not such a fool as to suppose that Hammerton was not also aware of it. He made no effort to see him, but simply dropped him a note, in which, quietly pointing out that the week's grace agreed upon had elapsed, he begged leave to inform Captain Hammerton that, should his terms not be complied with in the course of the following week, he would trouble him—Captain Hammerton—no more, but endeavour to make other arrangements.

"A very guarded, ambiguous letter," muttered the Captain; "he knows no more where Wheldrake is than I do, and, even if he did, it's a very open question whether he would venture to sell him our secret. I think I had better not reply to this. Forget who the swell was who said, 'If you have any doubt about writing a letter, *don't*.' Clever man, though; it saves trouble, and rather seems to suit this case, at all events," and so Captain Hammerton quietly ignored his friend's second application.

But Patroceni's next move not only somewhat astonished Captain Hammerton, but it further puzzled the astute Mr. Glanfield. Patroceni retired once more to the Continent.

"Has he gone in pursuit of Wheldrake?" muttered Fred Hammerton, when the news reached him. "Wheldrake, I know, has left no address; as far as I can make out, he has confided his moves to no one. Still, the foreign police are clever, and Patroceni, I fancy, thoroughly understands how to utilise their talents. To run down Wheldrake may take him some time; for Wheldrake to return and establish his innocence may take him some time longer. Every day—nay, every hour, that a man leaves a charge like this hanging over his head makes the dissipating of it more difficult. No; I will play my own hand without further regard to my confederate. Let him do his worst; if it is not done quickly I shall care very little for what he can allege against me. Let my uncle only stick to the intentions expressed in this

letter and my game seems easy. 'Will I join them in a trip to the Continent and be their *cicerone?*' I should rather think I would! Free quarters, and a run on the Continent, exactly suits this child, with the beastly spring weather we are coming to. I can't afford to *really* hunt this year, so I'll just realise the two or three horses I have right off, and, if I don't bring Maude to book before we get back, why, then I'll say I never deserve another opening. I have only one thing to think of, what places will be most agreeable for me (for, of course, it's all one to them where they go). I certainly don't want to come across Patroceni, but even if we do he's bound to give us a wide berth after the Wrottsley business."

As for Glanfield, he was considerably puzzled at Patroceni's departure, and during his considerable experience of the seamy side of human nature Glanfield failed to recall any case in which such a fell accusation as that launched at Cyril Wheldrake had not either been based on a fact or actuated by a powerful motive. He had discarded fact as a thing past belief; there remained only the motive. What was it? Whatever his motive might be, how was it possible to compass it if Patroceni left England? and that the Count had left England Glanfield had clearly convinced himself. He was completely mystified; had he been less loyal to Cyril he must have yielded to the evidence of his senses, and concluded that Wheldrake, in a moment of madness, had set himself to coerce fortune. Well, you cannot keep your eye upon any one with whose whereabouts you are unacquainted. Mr. Glanfield, who had a great idea of himself in the character of the amateur detective, acquiesced in circumstances, and waited patiently for what the next move might be in the adversary's game; but the weeks slipped by without a sign of Patroceni. The Wheldrake card-case, as it was termed, gradually faded from men's minds. The winter was passed and gone, and the beginning of the London season had come. One day Mr. Glanfield received a note from Mrs.

Fullerton, informing him that the little house in Hans Place was once more tenanted by its mistress, and requiring him to call at his earliest convenience, as she had much to say to him. "Really a matter of importance," wrote the widow. "I might even ask you to forego your favourite pursuit, and see whether it is not possible that Epsom and Ascot could be carried on without you."

"There it is," said Mr. Glanfield, as he finished reading the note. "That's just like a woman. The serious business of a man's life, if she wants to be taken to a public entertainment, must be put on one side. I know from former experience what Mrs. Fullerton calls matter of serious importance. Can't get a box for the Lyceum! Wants an escort to the Old Masters, or something of that sort. Bless you, if you only give 'em their heads," continued Mr. Glanfield, meditatively, "it's impossible to say what you won't find yourself entered for! Cat-shows, poultry-shows, the Lord knows what!"

But, although Mr. Glanfield might grumble, he never dreamt of not attending to any behest either of Mrs. Fullerton's or of Maude's. He had known the widow before her marriage, and there had been, indeed, a slight flirtation between them in youth, which might possibly have blossomed into matrimony had Glanfield at that time possessed means to support a wife; but till his father's death he had been a man with no profession, and but such moderate income as that father chose to allow him. As for Maude he had known her from a child. She had conferred upon him the brevet rank of uncle at an early period of their acquaintance, with all the privileges attached to the character, which included the providing her with a perpetuity of toys, sweetmeats, &c., and occasionally taking her to a pantomime.

Mr. Glanfield lost no time in attending to Mrs. Fullerton's summons, and was greeted on his appearance with much cordiality by the widow.

"This, really, is a matter of great importance that I wish

to consult you about. Sit down there, don't fidget, and I will give you some tea in the course of a few minutes."

If there was one fault Mr. Glanfield could claim exemption from it was fidgeting. Nobody ever took the vicissitudes of daily life with more calmness than he did. He quietly established himself in an easy chair, and waited till it should please the fair Fullerton to unbosom herself.

"Mr. Glanfield," said the widow, after a slight pause, "Sir Jasper has made up his mind for a run abroad. This season London is not destined to be graced by our presence; but we are all neophytes at Continental travel, and I am deputed to ask you to do us a great favour. Will you be our guide, counsellor, and friend? We are willing to put ourselves entirely in your hands, go where you will, if we only can persuade you to take charge of us."

"Give me a moment or two to think, Mrs. Fullerton," replied Glanfield; "and then, perhaps, you wouldn't object to my asking one or two questions."

"No, sir; taking charge of myself and Maude, I am sure, is a somewhat serious business," rejoined the widow, with a saucy toss of the head; "though no doubt there *are* men who would consider themselves equal to the responsibility."

"Do you suppose Maude still cares for Cyril Wheldrake?"

"I'm puzzled. I fairly own I'm puzzled. I did think that I could follow the twists and turns of a girl's mind. I'm sure I ought to, for I twisted and turned enough myself when I was a girl."

"Yes, *fillies* are apt to be uncertain," rejoined Glanfield, gravely. "You never can tell when they will try and when they won't."

"Mr. Glanfield," retorted the widow, sharply, "for about the thousandth time I must beg you to express yourself in intelligible language. *Filets* are in my mind associated with cookery."

"Beg pardon! What I mean to say is young women are

difficult to understand. I can't tell, for instance, whether Miss Eversley is trying to forget Wheldrake or to remember him."

"Difficult to understand; not in the least, if you men were not so absorbed in your own ridiculous pursuits that you neglect the most important and interesting study of a man's life—and that is woman, sir."

"Oh, I don't pretend to understand that sort of thing myself," replied Glanfield, slowly; "but it seems to me they save us the trouble of any profound study now-a-days."

"He knows more about us than I gave him credit for," said Mrs. Fullerton to herself. "I confess I am beaten, Mr. Glanfield," she continued, aloud. "Whether Maude has put Cyril Wheldrake away from her thoughts or no I cannot make up my mind."

"I should think she had," retorted Glanfield, a little bitterly. "I never saw a more decided revolution in the betting—any one can see Hammerton's first favourite now."

"Just what a man would think; but favourites don't always win, I've heard; at all events the apparent favourite doesn't always carry off the prize when a girl's heart is in question," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton, sharply.

"Perhaps not. Still, Wheldrake, innocent as I believe him, could hardly hope a girl would stand to him in such a struggle."

"He must be innocent about the working of a girl's heart as yet, if he thought she would do anything else," said the widow, with a derisive laugh. "The only question was,—Did she love him? I know she did, I think she does."

"But an accusation such as was brought against Wheldrake ——"

"Is nothing in the eyes of a woman who likes him. Cheat at cards! Why, we all do if we can. We don't like being found out, but we don't mind doing it."

"We've rather got out of the course, havn't we?" observed Glanfield, mildly, perfectly aware that the discus-

sion of card-table moralities with a lady was equivalent to the discussion of the law of property with an Irish Member of Parliament.

"Got out of the course?" exclaimed the widow with the prettiest affectation of utter bewilderment.

"I mean, rather strayed from the subject," replied Glanfield, hurriedly.

"Oh dear, Mr. Glanfield, why don't you do yourself justice? Show us the classical acquirements I know you possess, instead of deluging us with the Racing Calendar."

"Classical acquirements don't win Derbys or anything else in these days. When a fellow quotes Horace in the House no other fellow understands him. Pity a young woman like you, Mrs. Fullerton, don't go with the times ——"

"Well," retorted the widow, furiously, "my dresses come from Worth's, and if that is not going with the times I should very much like to know what is, and where it can be done cheaper."

"Beg pardon! We're all wrong again. There's not a woman in London looks better than you when you're stripped. No, I don't mean that," exclaimed Mr. Glanfield, looking much confused, and as he half rose stepping into his hat. "I mean when you've got your clothes off. No; I don't mean that," almost shrieked Mr. Glanfield, as in a tremour of agitation he reseated himself and endeavoured to do what never was done yet, straighten that lacerated hat out again. "No, no; I mean when you've thrown off your wraps, opera cloak, and all that ——"

"It was as well you did explain, sir," replied the widow, nearly suffocated with laughter. "Why on earth don't you talk ordinary English like any one else."

"Shouldn't be much like any one else if I did," replied Glanfield, sententiously; "that is, any one in good society. I do my best, Mrs. Fullerton, but old Johnson wouldn't himself be in it in these days."

"Never mind old Johnson. Nobody ever reads *him*. But you do think I know how to dress," said the widow, coquettishly.

"Rather; and I flatter myself I'm a judge of when you're properly groomed and pitched out ——"

"Groomed and pitched out! What does the man mean? Mr. Glanfield, you are incorrigible."

"No, I'm not. I apologise. So very odd you don't understand modern English."

"Very odd! Pray go on, sir," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton, petulantly.

"Of course I know you are about the best dressed, best turned-out woman of my acquaintance," said Glanfield, quietly.

"And the general effect is ——"

"Almost depressing," replied Glanfield, drily; "you see you're so dreadful lovely I am almost afraid to speak to you."

"Pshaw, what nonsense you talk! As if a woman wouldn't always listen to a man who expressed admiration for herself. But can we depend on you for this tour?"

"Most certainly," replied Glanfield, with a dubious glance at his hat. "You and Maude can always do that," he continued, as he feebly endeavoured to rectify the little accident to his headgear. "In the meantime I'll say good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mr. Glanfield; and if I might suggest anything it would be a visit to your hatter's, as your unaided exertions will never make a hat of that article again;" and with a ripple of laughter which sent Glanfield hurriedly out of the room the widow extended her hand in a vain attempt to say good-bye to her discomfited knight.

CHAPTER XI.

"JACKSON HAS HIS SUSPICIONS."

"Well," exclaimed Mr. Glanfield, when he found himself in the street, "here's a pretty go! I havn't missed seeing the Derby since I was eighteen, and here's Mrs. Fullerton goes and upsets the continuity of the calendar. What put it into her head that I am a competent courier? I don't understand foreign money and know generally nothing about foreign travel; and, hang it, I've got a pony on 'Queen of the May,' and shan't know before midsummer whether she's won the Oaks, I suppose."

Immersed in such reflections, Glanfield leisurely made his way to the Blenheim, where he was at once hailed by a little knot, who were evidently discussing some subject with considerable animation in the bay window of the morning room.

"Here's Jim Glanfield can tell us all about it," exclaimed one of them. "What's the truth about this business of Wheldrake's. You were there, Jim, and know what really took place. I'm told he's written to the committee and taken his name off the books, but, beyond stating that he is innocent, vouchsafes no explanation. He's one of the straightest fellows I know, and I'd as soon suspect him of playing tricks with the pasteboard as any of the lot here of nailing my watch."

"And, on my honour, I believe you'd be right, Lacy. Wheldrake's case for the present is hopeless, but I hold him thoroughly innocent. Who put the cards into his note-case I can't venture to guess, but they weren't put there by him, I'll swear. However, don't let us talk about it; it's a good fellow ruined from sheer treachery I'm convinced, and the day will come when we shall get at it."

But this little knot in the bay window were by no means to be pacified by that brief statement. Wheldrake was a very popular man, and his companions, like Lacy, were

loath to believe him guilty of such a crime. They insisted on cross-examining Glanfield, and gradually drew from him the whole history of that luckless evening's baccarat, but they one and all shook their heads at his narration. Anxious as they all were to find some probable explanation, they could not but admit that when extra cards are found in a man's note-case the presumption is that he placed them there in default of any evidence to the contrary. As to Glanfield, having once stated his positive conviction of his friend's innocence, he abstained from further comment. He answered briefly, but willingly, every question that was put to him, and was evidently relieved when his interlocutors ceased their inquiries. From that time men shook their heads over Cyril Wheldrake; it was very sad, but the evidence was very conclusive. Patroceni most of them had never heard of, but Hammerton was well-known, and that he had introduced the Count at Wrottsley was deemed sufficient proof of Patroceni's position in his own country. It was not likely that Fred Hammerton would introduce a man of doubtful antecedents into his uncle's house, and the old insular prejudice existent at the beginning of the century against the foreigner has long disappeared.

There was no one in London perhaps more thoroughly nonplussed by Wheldrake's disappearance, for he had carried out the intention he announced to Glanfield, than Mr. Chisel. A night or two after Jim's visit Wheldrake informed that worthy of his intention of leaving for the Continent by the morning train; that he, Chisel, would be left behind, but was to hold himself in readiness to join his master on the receipt of orders to that effect. The valet, who was not only sincerely attached to Wheldrake, but who foresaw a somewhat dullish time before him in London, pleaded earnestly that he might also go; but his master was peremptory on the point, telling him that, if anything he (Chisel) deemed of importance should transpire, he was at once to communicate it to Mr. Glanfield. Cyril little foresaw when he took

his ticket for the Continent that Mr. Glanfield would speedily follow in his footsteps, and that he was leaving his interests in the hands of a man not destined to be in the way to attend to them,—an unfortunate accident, as he was destined eventually to find out.

Now the man who really had the clue to the mystery, and who, if he had told what he knew, could have given Glanfield the key to it all, was old Jackson; but old Jackson was heavy of thought, and, astonished as he had been by that discovery of supplementary nines on the table, had as yet never been able to put his puzzle together. To any man accustomed to play cards it would have been obvious at *once* that, whoever the introducer of those extra cards might be, he must have had a confederate amongst the servants. Had that commonplace truth dawned upon Jackson's mind what could have been simpler for him than to ascertain which servant it was who habitually sorted the cards and restored them to their place in the box? Whoever that man was he must have invariably taken away those extra nines, thereby restoring the packs to their natural condition, but all this never occurred to the old man. That those extra nines weren't right he was quite aware of; that there was something wrong going on at the evening's card-playing he was also, as he told Sir Jasper, perfectly certain, but it was quite beyond him to put two and two together this way. What puzzled him was child's play to Patroceni, and to discover Hammerton's confederate the work of an hour or two. Indeed he pretty well knew who the suborned footman was before the explosion took place.

But to Jackson this was by no means so clear. The old man was anxious to do what was right. He knew, as all the house did, that there had been a row over the card-playing; but as to the exact particulars of that fracas they were all in ignorance. He was devoted to Miss Maude, as indeed were all the servants at Wrottsley. He thought very highly of Wheldrake, and was delighted at the idea

that Cyril was to marry his young mistress; but then again for years he and Sir Jasper's retainers had been accustomed to hold "the Captain" in great veneration. He wasn't, perhaps, quite such a nailer with a gun as Parson Pilcher, and it might be when it came to a question of racing that Mr. Glanfield knew a bit more than he did; but still, take it all round, in the vernacular of the stable-yard "the Captain was a clipper." Free-handed with his sovereigns, Fred Hammerton always was—impecunious unfortunates of this kind always are; and Hammerton quite justified their opinions insomuch that he was a fairly good all-round sportsman. As for his gambling, Wrottsley knew little of that; but that the young gentleman should like what they termed "just a flutter" with the cards was a thing the old servants had been brought up to expect. Such a case as the present had certainly never occurred there before in their experience; but suspect the Captain, either Mr. Wheldrake or Mr. Glanfield, they couldn't; and, therefore, naturally arrived at the conclusion that "that there furriner was at the bottom of it." The real delinquent in the meantime held his tongue; he lived in fear and trembling. He had been well paid for what he had done, and differed from his fellow-servants only in this—instead of thinking that that confounded foreigner was the offender, he lived in grievous apprehension that Patroceni had *got* to the bottom of it. Still, the more the butler pondered over those nines the more it gradually dawned on him that it was probably not the only occasion on which they had been used so freely. Of a slow-thinking, bucolic nature, it was long before he thoroughly mastered this idea; and even then it wasn't until talking it over—whilst consuming a pint of mulled port with Mrs. Smithson, the housekeeper—that an observation of that lady's drew attention to the circumstance.

"Mr. Jackson," said she, patting out the brown silk dress in which she was wont to array herself when she had ascertained that the dinner was properly dished up, "if that

superfluity of nines was customary, who was it put them packs straight in the morning?"

"Mrs. Smithson," rejoined the butler, "a woman of genius you always was, I know; but by the Lord, marm, you're a clinker, that's what you are. You've about hit it, you have." And old Jackson slapped his hand on his thigh, as his manner was when he considered he had made a point.

"I don't think I am quite a fool," said Mrs. Smithson, both beaming and bridling at her companion's encomiums; "but which of the young good-for-nothings (and the lamp-chimneys they break and the glass-cloths they use no one can imagine) it was that used to put these cards right must be matter easy to ascertain."

"Right you are, marm. Dead on a fact, as Parson Pilcher is on a rabbit. I'll get hold of it before this time to-morrow, and as you say, Mrs. Smithson—or was about to say (just one more glass, marm, before we says good-night)—there's a young man in this house who that there foreign Count has utterly corrupted, and drag the truth out of him we must. They are apt to be uppish, these juniors; but I think, my dear marm, we know two people who can keep 'em in their places;" and with a leer, in which the strength of the port wine negus was visibly obvious, Mr. Jackson wished the housekeeper a good-night more affectionately than was called for.

Viewed through the general atmosphere of the wine-cup things are apt to seem quite easy of accomplishment which the quiet consideration of morning regards in a very different light, and old Jackson was not quite the man to investigate a delicate question. He was imbued with an overwhelming sense of his own sagacity; and, though anxious to expose the "furriner," and, to use his own expression, put the saddle on the right horse, he would have scouted the idea of taking any one's advice upon what appeared to him now such a very simple matter. It was just that apparent simplicity that constituted the difficulty. He ascertained without any

trouble the next morning who it was that habitually resorted the packs and restored them to the card-box; but William, the footman in question, was quite positive as to never having found a card too many while doing so. He was very clear about it indeed, declaring the two packs sorted out perfectly even every morning, and that it was a sheer impossibility that a single extra card could have escaped his notice. It was now that Jackson showed his utter incompetence to fulfil the *rôle* of detective. Thoroughly convinced that he had found the culprit, he threatened him with all sorts of penalties and denunciation unless he made a clean breast of it, and at once confessed his collusion with Count Patroceni. It was in vain the unfortunate William protested his innocence and adhered to his statement. Jackson, a little after the pattern of our own police, having made up his mind that this was the guilty person, refused to entertain any other view of the affair, and shut his eyes to what would have occurred at once to Glanfield and did occur to Patroceni, namely, that William was not the first person who ran over those cards in the morning. Hammerton might not be an artist of the first power, but he was not quite such a bungler as to select for his confederate the man upon whom, in case of a disturbance, suspicion must infalliby fall.

Steadily persisting in his suspicion, Jackson drove the unfortunate William to the verge of frenzy. What he had done was unknown to the household, but that he was the committer of some dark but undiscovered crime was a fixed fact with them all, from Mrs. Smithson and the butler down to the scullerymaid, and that odd boy who usually does most of all his fellow-servants' work. The luckless footman went about with a criminal taint surrounding him. Jackson wagged his head in portentous silence when questioned, as over an impenitent thief. In his own class the hapless William was as distinctly tabooed as Cyril Wheldrake; and when, at the expiration of a scarcely endurable fortnight, he

gave warning, Mr. Jackson predicted a speedy accession to the denizens of Portland Prison, and trusted that might be the worst that should come to William in this world; winding up with objurgations upon the enormity of not making such reparation for offending "as owning up to your fault like a man."

The family had by this left Wrottsley, and Sir Jasper was staying in town till such time as all their preparations for a lengthened tour abroad should be completed; but Mrs. Fullerton was not the woman to depart on any expedition of the kind without a due assortment of dresses; and those having experiences of a dressmaker's fulfilment of her obligations during the London season will know there is much uncertainty about the concluding of such arrangements. So Sir Jasper and his belongings still dawdled on in London; and Maude had to play that bitter part which has been played so many times by maidens whose love-tale has gone askew, namely, facing society with unblenching brow and the sunny smile of a girl to whom life is without a care.

Ah, me! if we could but see behind the well-bred, easy air that it is conventional to wear amongst those who are deemed the spoiled children of fashion I think we should often own that the game was by no means worth the candle. That girl in such bewitching costume, glorious eyes, and lovely complexion, is haunted by the threats of a termagant milliner, who vows, unless she has unimpeachable testimony of her client's betrothal, she will have either her money or proceed to extremities at the end of the season. That man with a cigar in his mouth and a gardenia in his button-hole, who has raised his hat a score of times between Hyde Park Corner and Albert Gate, is gravely wondering how much longer it will be before that menaced execution will be levied on his goods and chattels in that pretty little house in May Fair by the inexorable Queen's taxes, whose demands he sees no possibility of satisfying. Yes, life is not all so rosy when we are allowed to peep behind the scenes, and many of those

that seem objects of envy have but a gruesome time, did we but know it.

Hammerton strictly carried out the tactics he had confided to Patroceni. He was unwearied in his attendance on his cousin, and, solicited or not, Maude rarely appeared in public without him as her cavalier. The girl thought nothing of it. She had been used to him all her life, and Fred Hammerton was far too astute a manœuvrer to make love to her at present. He treated her always with a marked deference calculated to convey to lookers-on that he was a lover without giving the girl herself the slightest pretext for regarding him in that light. Nobody understood better than Hammerton the compromising of a girl in this wise; and so cleverly was it done that even Jim Glanfield began to question whether Maude had not, despite Mrs. Fullerton's dictum, put Cyril thoroughly away from her thoughts.

CHAPTER XII.

STARTING FOR THE CONTINENT.

Jackson was a man of slow conception, and the incubation of his ideas was no speedy matter. He was gradually coming to the conclusion that it was his duty to write to Sir Jasper and tell him of the discovery he had made, when he was startled by the discovery that the supposed culprit's month's notice was up, and by his taking a summary departure. This once more upset the old butler, leaving him another knotty point to decide—namely, whether it was worth his while to communicate his discovery now that the delinquent had disappeared; and the result of a prolonged conference with Mrs. Smithson was that he had better keep his suspicions to himself. Mrs. Smithson, who was a tolerably shrewd woman, pointed out that Miss Maude's engage-

ment was completely broken off, and she rather doubted their ability to put things straight again; and, at all events, it was very difficult for them to tell the whole story in a letter, and that completely settled the case. Mr. Jackson had a great idea of his own eloquence, but no great confidence in his epistolary powers, and so the thing was postponed till such time as he should see Sir Jasper again.

But it soon became evident to Mrs. Fullerton that Maude, although she made no sign of moping, and went out everywhere, was, nevertheless, suffering a great deal. All the spring seemed to have gone out of the girl's life. Garden-party or dance, play or cricket-match, seemed to interest her no longer. She, who hitherto had enjoyed life so keenly, seemed now to have lost all zest for it; and though she bore it bravely her aunt could see that what she specially shrank from was the meeting of so many people to whom the whole story was known, and who inadvertently alluded to it within her hearing. The scandal about Wheldrake, like most such stories in the London world, had been but a nine days' wonder, but it was still fresh in men's minds; and the appearance of that pretty Miss Eversley so constantly recalled it to people's recollection, and provoked comment thereon, which, though not intended for Maude's hearing, seldom escaped her ears. Mrs. Fullerton was both very fond and proud of her niece, and rapidly came to the conclusion that change of scene, or rather of people, was what Maude required—that the girl would be better amongst strangers, where she was not continually reminded of her lover's shame; and, having made up her mind on that point, hastened the arrangements for departure as much as recalcitrant dressmakers would permit. No sooner did Hammerton discover that the hour of departure drew near than he took speedy steps to enrol himself of the party. It would have answered his purpose infinitely better if Maude had remained in town through the whole of the season, in order that he might appear continually by her

side. He was not going to neglect his opportunity. No one knew better than he that many a girl's hand, though not her heart, is won on the rebound. It might not be of any use to speak to Maude yet, but he did not intend to leave the field open to any one else. He had run that risk already, and hardly liked to think what it had cost him to oust that successful rival. Patroceni was, he knew, a very dangerous and skilful man to have arrayed against him, and more especially so when he held one in his power; and Hammerton knew the Count too well to suppose that, though he had disappeared for the time, he had by any means relinquished his intention of sharing the spoils. Well, there was no question about dividing the plunder at present, though that, when there was, Patroceni would re-appear upon the scene, he felt morally certain. Indeed, Hammerton would probably have acceded to the Count's original request had it been in his power to procure the first instalment of the sum demanded.

Calling one day at Mrs. Fullerton's, Mr. Glanfield, on being ushered into the drawing-room, found it occupied solely by Maude. He had never seen the girl alone since the *fracas* at Wrottsley, and, as may be supposed, the incident of that night had never been alluded to between them.

"Quick, Mr. Glanfield!" she exclaimed, as she motioned him to a chair, "tell me at once what you have heard?"

"Do you mean about our departure?"

"No; about Cyril. Tell me everything. I know nothing whatever about him since that terrible night. They never mention his name to me. What has he done? What has become of him? If I catch the echo of his name in society, voices are immediately stilled in my presence; but even from the little I have gathered I know that he is cast out from amongst us."

"I fancy," replied Glanfield, "I was about the last person Cyril saw before he left London. He was utterly crushed by the disgrace that had fallen upon him. You have heard

the truth; he is socially ruined. He told me he was going abroad, and promised to write; but as yet I have not heard from him. Is it impertinent to ask if you still take an interest in him?"

"That I should still take an interest in a man who stood to me in the relation that Cyril once did is only natural. That I should feel anything more," continued the girl, "is scarcely likely. He has never condescended to let me hear from or of him since that night. I said I believed in him in spite of appearances. He apparently believed neither in himself nor me."

"My dear Miss Eversley, I assure you ——" but at this juncture the door opened, and Mrs. Fullerton entered the room.

"Good morning, Mr. Glanfield," she exclaimed, gaily. "I really do believe I shall be ready to start next week. I arranged it all with Jasper yesterday. We are to have a good long lounging tour all over the Continent—Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. We shall not get back before the beginning of September."

"Ah!" said Glanfield anxiously, "the beginning! Now do let us be sure that it *is* the beginning."

"Why dear me," retorted Mrs. Fullerton, "surely the partridges can wait for another week or two."

"Oh, aunt," said Maude, smiling, "I should have thought you would have understood Mr. Glanfield better."

"Partridges!" exclaimed that gentleman contemptuously; "yes, they will wait fast enough; but the St. Leger you see is a fixed feast, and ——"

"You really are irreclaimable," said Mrs. Fullerton. "You never can for an instant put your favourite pursuit on one side."

"It is something to have a pursuit in these days, and not be one of the many who have got nothing to do, be it work or pleasure."

"I suppose you will be ready to accompany us?"

"Always ready at twenty-four hours' notice to go anywhere," rejoined Glanfield. "Have you arranged matters with Captain Hammerton, for I'm told he is coming too."

"Oh yes; he is only awaiting orders. I am looking forward to Italy so much; I have never been there."

Maude gave a slight shiver. She could but recollect how Cyril had talked of Italy for their bridal-tour. The name also attracted Glanfield's attention, and it occurred to him as just possible that they might come across Patroceni in those parts, and in that case learn more of his antecedents than any one seemed to know at present; and then, while Mrs. Fullerton was describing to Maude a travelling costume destined to desolate all hearts, Glanfield recalled Wheldrake's presentiment, and wondered if he should be present at the next game between them, should it ever be played. No doubt the Continent was wide, but the beaten tracks of travel are pretty much the same in all countries, and he did not suppose their party would deviate from them. He then rose and bade the two ladies good-bye.

Mrs. Fullerton's spirits were infectious; and, what with her aunt's vivacity and the idea of leaving town, Maude felt more like her old self than she had done since the rupture of her engagement. It was very possible that there was some lurking hope in her breast that in the course of their wanderings they might come across Cyril Wheldrake; and, although she spoke frankly enough to Jim Glanfield of her resentment at his silence, she knew at the bottom of her heart that she was true as ever to her love.

When Glanfield arrived at his rooms he was not a little astonished to find Wheldrake's servant waiting to see him.

"Come in, Chisel," he exclaimed. "What is it? I suppose you have some news of your master?"

"No, sir; indeed I was in hopes to hear something of him from you. Mrs. Fullerton's maid, you may have noticed her, very clean about the ancles, sir. Well, we got rather friendly down at Wrottsley. She corresponds with some

of the servants down there, and she tells me there's been a bit of a kick-up at the hall."

"Why, Sir Jasper's in town. Some row amongst the servants, I suppose. Really this doesn't concern me."

"No, sir, but she says that affair of my master's was at the bottom of the whole business."

"How the devil can that be? unless," he added thoughtfully, "there were two sides in the servants' hall, as there were in the drawing-room? Do you mean to say you know no more about it than this?"

"I can tell you no more than that, sir," replied Chisel.

"Fiddlesticks!" said Glanfield. "It's no use coming to me with the account of every idle quarrel that occurs in the servants' hall. Just as you and I hold your master innocent, so no doubt there was a diversity of opinion both above and below stairs. That something of the story would leak out there could be no doubt. It has been as plainly told in the papers as editors thought safe, though, of course, the real facts of the case are only known to those present. Of course you know why your master has gone abroad?"

"Yes, sir; there was a rumour of something up even before I left. Don't you think it advisable that I should go down to Wrottsley and see what I can make of it?"

"No," rejoined Glanfield, sharply, "most decidedly not."

Jim had great belief in himself as an amateur detective, and knew there was nothing so fatal as calling in incompetent subordinates who usually foil the scent. He felt sure that they would do little good until Patroceni showed his hand. As to this squabble in the servants' hall at Wrottsley they could always get at that if there should happen to be anything worth knowing in it.

"Well, sir, you know best," replied Chisel, ruefully; "but you're going away in a few days, and then where am I to look for orders?"

"To your master of course; he told you when he left that you were to wait here and look after things till he sent for

you. That's clear enough; when he wants you no doubt you'll hear," retorted Glanfield, curtly.

"Then I suppose there's nothing for me to do at all, sir," responded Chisel, in crushed tones.

"Nothing but what I tell you. Wait for orders;" and with a nod of his head Glanfield dismissed the valet.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHELDRAKE FALLS INTO STRANGE COMPANY.

The London season, with all its glitter and gossip, is a thing of the past. The Eversleys and their party had now been abroad for some time, and, except Sir Jasper's bankers, no one seems to know their exact whereabouts. Of Wheldrake nothing has been heard since his departure, and Mr. Chisel is still awaiting those orders which seem destined never to come. Seated at the door of one of the small pavilions that stand within the grounds of the Villa del Reale is Count Patroceni, enjoying a cigarette and looking lazily over the Bay of Naples. On the table by his side stands his coffee; as he continues to smoke with half-closed eyes a more indolent-looking gentleman could scarcely have been found.

"Ah," he said, with a smile, to himself, "people don't mean much as a rule by general invitations, but I hear Sir Jasper Eversley and his family are wandering about this part of the world, and it won't be my fault if he does not pay me a visit. It is very curious that I should have been unable to trace Wheldrake. I have good friends among the police, and better means of procuring information than most people, yet I have not been able to hear anything of him since he left London. It is odd—it is worse, it is disappointing; for not only have I important business to transact

with him, but I also have that little account to settle with my friend Captain Hammerton: such ingratitude I can bear from no one. Ho, Matteo!" And the Count rapped his cane on the table.

The swarthy proprietor of the pavilion rapidly emerged from the building, in answer to the Count's summons.

"Ah, Eccellenza!" he exclaimed, in a manner almost servile, "it is like the refreshing dew to see you once again. May your devoted follower trust that your Excellency is in good health? What can I do for you?"

"Have you any news for me? Any one worth knowing, for instance, coming my way?"

"Ah, yes, signor," replied Matteo, "there are a rich English lord and his party who have just arrived, who talk about making an excursion in your direction, whom you and I would gladly welcome."

"Ha! when did they arrive?" inquired the Count.

"They only arrived in Naples two days ago; but don't speak too loud, Eccellenza, or you will wake the Englishman, who is sleeping inside there."

"An Englishman? What Englishman?" asked Patroceni, lowering his voice; "does he belong to the English lord's party?"

"No, signor," replied Matteo, softly, "he is one of these travelling English; he arrived here some two hours ago, on foot, complained of being tired, asked for a room, and has gone to sleep."

"I have been too much in that country lately," muttered the Count, "to risk meeting a possible acquaintance—at all events, just now. You must find out when they start. Matteo," he continued, "I will send up Giovanni to hear your news, and also to keep an eye on this stranger, though I don't suppose he is of much consequence. I will let myself out through the back of the house; I don't want as yet to encounter any of this English party."

"Ah, he is a wonderful man, his Excellency!" ejaculated

Matteo, drawing a deep breath expressive of his deep admiration for the Count. "These English! It is picturesque, no doubt, dining with the signor up yonder," and he jerked his fingers significantly in the direction of Monte St. Angelo, "but it is expensive; none of my profession dare send in bills like his."

A few minutes more and the Englishman of whom Matteo had spoken came out of the pavilion; and had Patroceni delayed his departure those few minutes he would have found himself face to face with the very man he was so anxious to see.

"I hope the signor is refreshed by his siesta," said Matteo, bowing, as he proceeded to clear away the *débris* of the Count's coffee.

"Thank you, my good host," said Wheldrake, as he threw himself into a seat. "Get me a bottle of wine, and get me something to eat. It is hard," he muttered to himself, as Matteo disappeared to fulfil the order, "to be looked askance at by all my friends, socially blasted, and from no fault of my own. Men wreck their lives from their own vice and folly; but I am the innocent victim of the foulest treachery! I wonder what has become of them all! Can that paragraph be true that I saw in one of the society papers, that she is about to marry Hammerton? Do women ever really love us? A few months back, and I should have laughed at the man who questioned it. In my hour of agony, when this terrible charge was first, to all appearance, proved against me, Maude refused to believe it. Swore she would never doubt me, come what might; and now that paper says she is about to marry Hammerton! I have heard men say women never sorrow about us long, but I did think Maude would have felt my ruin a little longer. No, Maude, my dearest, I may by this have faded from your mind. The memory of our former love may only recur to you like a happy dream, of which the awakening was shame and disgrace; but I thank God still for having given me that dream."

"There, signor," said Matteo, as he emerged from the house with the required refreshment; "that is such a bottle of wine, though I say it, as you'll scarcely get for twenty miles round. The signor seems sad; try it, my lord, it will raise your spirits."

"Excellent!" rejoined Wheldrake. "Fill a glass for yourself; such stuff as this is as good for the host as for the guest, a thing not always the case amongst your fraternity, my friend."

"Ah! Eccellenza, we had better not say too much on that point," said Matteo, smacking his lips. "Pshaw!" he continued, with a shrug of his shoulders, "there is much wine made that it is better to sell than to drink."

"A man needn't travel far to find that out," rejoined Wheldrake. "By the way, have you ever heard of a Count Patroceni? I'm told he lives near Naples."

"The Count, signor, the Count!" said Matteo, with evident astonishment. "Count Patroceni, a most amiable and respected nobleman in these parts. Yes, my lord, much loved and respected."

"I can imagine that," rejoined Wheldrake, slowly. "But, ah! whom have we here?"

"A most respectable farmer of these parts," replied Matteo.

"Ah! good day, Giovanni. How have the markets been of late?" he continued, patronisingly.

If the new-comer warranted Matteo's encomium his looks belied him, for he was about as truculent-looking a ruffian as is often come across.

"A little overdone with respectability this community," muttered Wheldrake. "The Count's much respected, and my friend here is a most respectable farmer. There's generally some d——d villainy cloaked beneath so much respectability."

"Markets are dull," replied Giovanni, as he seated himself at Wheldrake's table; "but his Excellency tells me they are about to mend. Get me some wine, my good Matteo."

"You make yourself at home, friend," remarked Wheldrake, staring at his uninvited companion.

"Most people do in an inn," retorted the farmer, as he raised his glass to his lips.

"One of the Count's tenants, signor," interposed Matteo, nervously. "A most respectable man, I assure you."

"Ah! you hold property under Count Patroceni?" said Wheldrake.

"Yes," replied Giovanni, laughing, "we all do, and as much as we can lay our hands on," and, as he finished, he again filled his glass.

"Yes, Eccellenza," again interposed Matteo, hurriedly, "the Count is such an excellent landlord his tenants are always anxious to hold ——"

"More and more property," interrupted Giovanni, with a boisterous guffaw. "*Capperi!* his Excellency keeps a tight grasp, and takes care our share is never so large," and as he finished speaking he poured himself out another bumper.

"Your share?" exclaimed Wheldrake.

"He means, signor," said Matteo, making signs to Giovanni to leave the bottle alone, "that the Count's rents are a percentage system of the harvests gathered."

"Yes, signor," said Giovanni, sulkily, "that's what I mean. These flasks of yours run very small, friend Matteo," and as he spoke he turned up his empty bottle in disgust.

"You are right," said Wheldrake, "try some of mine," and he pushed his wine across. "Matteo, my good fellow, see if you can find us another like this in the cellar."

Matteo hesitated for a moment and evidently regarded Giovanni with much misgiving; at last, with the brief observation, "Certainly, signor," he disappeared into the house.

"That's good stuff," said Giovanni; "it's a better brand than the vintage I've been drinking."

"Your landlord owns a large estate then?" said Wheldrake, inquiringly.

"Yes," replied Giovanni, grinning; "he levies taxes for many miles round;" and with a deep sigh of regret the unprepossessing farmer finished Wheldrake's flask.

"Levies taxes?"

"Yes, my little fellow, we take toll of most people in these parts."

At this moment Matteo emerged hurriedly from the pavilion.

"He means the Count has the right of *octroi* in these parts, signor," he said, as he put the fresh bottle on the table.

"I suppose there are a good many of you?" asked Wheldrake.

"Oh, about a score of as stout fellows as ever you saw," replied Giovanni, as he helped himself to the wine.

"And can I see this popular landlord of yours? I presume he lives no great distance from here ——"

"His Excellency lives here, there, and everywhere," replied Giovanni with a drunken laugh; "but he has a sweet little place near here, where, when at home, he is delighted to receive strangers. Like many men popular by reputation, his popularity rather disappears when seen and tried. I have known people call him an extortionate robber."

"The fellow's tongue is loosened by wine," thought Wheldrake; "another few glasses and I shall turn him inside out, like my glove, and find out what this scoundrel I have to deal with really is. Ah, my friend," he continued, turning to Giovanni, "rumour always lies. Fill a bumper, my friend, to his Excellency Count Patroceni, whom his detractors call an exorbitant robber."

"The drunken fool will betray all," muttered Matteo. "I must take matters into my own hands and send for assistance."

"More wine, my good Matteo!" cried Wheldrake, with assumed gaiety. "The Count's health, my friend! What was it you said your name was? Of course Giovanni is only a Christian name ——"

The unprepossessing farmer placed his elbows on the table, and, staring at Wheldrake with intense gravity, replied, "Giovanni, though the scum about here, and his Excellency in particular, address me as Giovanni the Hog."

"And the scum are about right," interposed Matteo, sharply. "Ah," he sighed, "he has had quite enough; do not encourage him."

"Bah! my friend," cried Wheldrake, go and get me another bottle; the respectable farmer and I are going to have a bout of it."

Matteo disappeared into the pavilion with a menacing frown at Giovanni as he passed his chair.

"Levies taxes! A score of good stalwart fellows," muttered Wheldrake. "What does this mean? The Count I know to be a thorough-paced villain. Why this extraordinary anxiety on the part of Matteo to explain away what this fellow says?"

"Come, my friend," cried Giovanni, as he pushed the bottle across, "another bumper to the 'King of the Road,' and success to his next venture!"

"Here's to the King of the Road," replied Wheldrake, with assumed drunkenness; "may the pockets of his next guests be well lined."

"*Mamma mia!* signor. What a sly little fellow you are. Why couldn't you say so at once?" he continued, winking. "You are one of us, and the fools have set me to watch you."

"Ha, yes, a real good joke!" rejoined Wheldrake, laughing. "Help yourself. Only to think of his Excellency making so great a mistake!"

"You know him well," said Giovanni, with that supernatural gravity that often seizes a drunken man.

"Know him? Yes, indeed; have drank with him, played with him ——"

"Played with him? Ha, ha, ha, ha!" cried Giovanni, with a peal of boisterous laughter. "Santo Diavolo! played

with him, and never won from him! Ho, Matteo, Matteo," continued the respectable farmer, "here's a man who has played cards with his Excellency. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ah, signor," exclaimed Matteo, as he hurried in from the pavilion, in answer to Giovanni's call. "You must pay no attention to his ravings. That drunken fool—a confirmed gambler. His Excellency was once good enough to humour him and play him for a quarter's rent. He lost, and ever since in his cups talks loudly of the Count's unparalleled luck."

"A quarter's rent," exclaimed Giovanni. "Ha, ha! he won me body and soul. Did you ever dice with the devil, Matteo? My head swims. Your wine is —— signor, no more, it's poisoned," and as he spoke his head dropped on the table, and Giovanni's tongue was temporarily at rest.

"Oh, signor," said Matteo, reproachfully, "you should not have indulged him in his besetting sin. What can I get for you, signors?" and he turned to a couple of rough-looking men of the farming class, who had just entered.

"Sin!" exclaimed Wheldrake. "Nonsense, it raises a man's spirits; it makes him forget. Giovanni has forgotten, so shall I, soon," and so saying he finished his glass drowsily. "A pretty nest of scoundrels I have fallen amongst," he muttered; and then, throwing himself back in his chair, prepared apparently to sleep off the effects of his indulgence.

Matteo glanced at Wheldrake for a moment, and then said in a low tone to the new comers, "What orders do you bring?"

"That the Englishman is to be watched, and not allowed to leave here if you think he suspects anything."

"Suspects! If he does not, he is the most innocent, unsuspicious man I ever met. Hush! he sleeps now, but you must keep your eye upon him. Sit down at this adjoining table, and I will bring you your wine."

"What's gone wrong?" inquired one of the new comers, as the pair took their seats.

"That hog, Giovanni, who you can see is drunk as usual, has babbled in his cups. But are there no more of you? These Englishmen are difficult to handle."

"Oh, yes. On receipt of your message his Excellency sent up four of us. Pietro is behind the trees, and Giuseppe round the angle of the house ——"

"Enough. Mind, he is not to leave this," said Matteo, sharply. "You will take your orders from me, and above all be moderate with the bottle," and so saying Matteo went into the pavilion in quest of wine.

The moment he had left, Wheldrake gave a drowsy yawn, and rolling round in his chair turned his back upon the new comers.

"Now that prying landlord's back is turned I had best quietly take my departure. What that villain Patroceni really is seems evident. A gentleman of fashion in England, a mere bandit-chief in his own country, an outcome probably of Garibaldi's raid and the upset of the Bourbons; this at all events is something to go upon. It will be news for Sir Jasper when he learns what manner of man Hammerton's friend was. Brigand, revolutionist, and evidently, in the opinion of my intoxicated friend there, an adept with the cards. Some of Patroceni's people these two last arrivals, no doubt. However the man especially told off to watch me is past even watching the bottle. The others," and here he stole a glance at the occupants of the adjoining table, "seem to have devoted themselves pretty much to the same task. That lynx-eyed Matteo is out of the way. As good to chance it now as wait."

Wheldrake rose softly from his seat unobserved by the two new comers, who were absorbed in their wine and conversation, and was quietly making his way towards the entrance to the gardens, when, from the shrubberies adjacent to the pavilion, issued an apparently drunken man, who lurched heavily against him.

"Out of the way, you drunken swine!" cried Wheldrake, rashly.

"What ho! friends, will you see an old comrade insulted?" shouted the stranger.

The two men at the table sprang instantly to their feet, another appeared from round the corner of the pavilion, and all three rushed instantly to the spot where Wheldrake was engaged in a scuffle with their comrade. Four against one, the odds were too much; and after a desperate struggle Wheldrake succumbed to his assailants, and was dragged back to the pavilion uttering cries for help.

"Santo Diavolo! we had better put a knife in him," growled one of the brigands.

"For your life, no! His Excellency's orders are peremptory; he is to be made prisoner only."

"Ah, here's Matteo," rejoined one of the others; "he will tell us what to do."

"Quick, gag him, you fools!" cried Matteo. "Bring him in at once, and don't let him draw the whole gardens round us."

In another instant a cloak was thrown about the prisoner's head, and he was carried *vi et armis* into the pavilion.

CHAPTER XIV.

LA VICARIA.

The sun was sinking beneath the blue waters of the Bay when Giovanni awoke from his drunken slumber and gazed vacantly around him. At first he had no very clear idea of where he was or what had taken place, but his bemazed mind gradually recovered itself, and he remembered that he had been despatched by his Excellency to keep an eye upon the Englishman. He looked round, the Englishman was

gone, and then a feeling of uneasiness almost amounting to terror came across him, for he was aware how merciless was the chief he served. Giovanni was no coward, but he had a superstitious awe of Patroceni. With card or sword, pistol or die, he looked upon it as hopeless to struggle with the Count. Then the man had seen more than one example of Patroceni's relentless vengeance on those who had failed him. He was no coward, but a shiver ran through his bulky frame as he thought of rendering an account of his errand to his chief.

A craving for a cup of wine to steady his nerves, and a feverish desire to know the extent of his error, at last induced him to shout in somewhat uncertain tones, "Matteo, ho Matteo!"

Voice and manner were very different from those of the swaggering ruffian of some two or three hours ago.

"What is your pleasure, signor?" asked Matteo, as he issued from the pavilion.

"A cup of wine, Matteo, for Heaven's sake; and what has become of that accursed Englishman?"

"How should I know? What is he to me? It was your business to see to that, and it is you that his Excellency will look to for information on that point."

"The wine, Matteo, first. Ah, fool that I am! His Excellency never forgives. Do you think this was a matter of much consequence?"

"Yes, of very grave consequence to you," rejoined Matteo, sarcastically. "But I'll get you a cup of strong wine: no more flasks, remember," and Matteo disappeared into the house.

"Ah, yes!" muttered Giovanni. "His Excellency is of a sadly unforgiving temper. Corpo di Bacco! I don't relish meeting him at all. Thanks, friend Matteo," he continued, as the host reappeared with a tumbler of wine. "What would you recommend me to do—go back or not?"

"It is for you to decide," replied Matteo, with a shrug of

his shoulders. "His Excellency punishes disobedience of orders pretty sharply, and I wouldn't stand in your shoes, my friend, for a trifle. But, on the other side, remember his hand reaches far, and there is no safety round about these parts for the deserter."

Giovanni gave a shrug of his shoulders.

"That's true. A man must die when his turn comes; and to escape his Excellency's vengeance, ah, who can?" and the brigand finished the wine-cup. "Stop, Matteo, there is one way. It is possible yet to track this Englishman, eh? What became of him?"

"That matters little to you. He has been taken care of; but don't flatter yourself that his Excellency will fail to hear how you played watch-dog."

"I didn't think you would be so hard upon an old friend," replied Giovanni. "You might leave me to tell my own story."

"It's ill trying to keep secrets from his Excellency. Fool, do you think I am going to get myself into trouble? Do you suppose a thing can be kept secret which is known to Pietro, Giuseppe, and the others?"

"What, were they here?"

"Who do you think secured the Englishman whilst you were senseless, in spite of all my warnings? I saw you were beginning to babble. You always do in your cups. The Englishman had learnt too much. It would have been dangerous to let him go."

"Ha! and they captured him. I'd best away to the forest at once, and make my confession to his Excellency. He'll perhaps ——"

"Put a bullet through those addled brains of yours," interrupted Matteo, sharply: "but it is possible—as, thanks to others, your mission was not a failure—he may overlook your—well, we'll say carelessness. But remember, Signor Giovanni, this is by no means the first instance of such carelessness; and although, in consideration of past services, his

Excellency has been lenient to your shortcomings, I'd recommend you not to count much further on it."

"It is hard, too, that a man's never to take his pleasure in this world," growled the brigand, as he rose from his chair.

"Take your pleasure, if stupefying yourself be so, only don't go to sleep when your orders are to keep your eyes open."

"Good-bye, Signor Matteo; your advice is as sound as your wine, though not half so pleasant to take;" and with these words Giovanni took his departure.

"He has courage," said Matteo to himself. "I have not, and the Count knows it; but I would sooner face a wild elephant than his Excellency after having bungled one of his commands in that fashion. It is possible I have seen Giovanni for the last time; but as we have not let the Englishman slip through our fingers the Count may forgive him. I wonder how the Englishman likes his new quarters? I don't know what he has been used to, but it must have been very poor accommodation if his present satisfies him;" and with a cynical chuckle Matteo retired into his own domain.

Seated on a truckle-bed in a garret, situated in that most miserable part of that very miserable suburb of Naples called La Vicaria, is Wheldrake, puzzling his brain in vain endeavours to account for the restless animosity of Count Patroceni. That his kidnappers are emissaries of that nobleman, if such he be, admits of no manner of doubt. What can be his object in thus making him a prisoner? Money, he presumes. He knows enough about the habitudes of Italian brigands to know that the capture of people with means, and the exaction of a heavy ransom from either themselves or their friends, is the most lucrative part of their trade. But then, how on earth did Patroceni know of his arrival in Naples? He had not been above a few hours in the town, indeed his luggage had not yet arrived to his

knowledge. He had walked across from Pompeii, turned into the Villa del Reale, with a view to a rest and enjoying the glorious prospect of the Bay and its surroundings. Suddenly, in the words of Coleridge, "an exposition of sleep" fell upon him, and he asked Matteo for leave to lie down in the pavilion; the sequel we have seen.

As yet his captors had made no sign of their intentions. He had been hurried through the pavilion, taken rapidly out of the gardens under the guise of a drunken man—for such was the explanation given by his assailants to the few who manifested curiosity concerning the affair—and had now been detained under lock and key some twenty-four hours. That he had been brought some three or four miles he computed by the time it had taken the carriage into which he had been hustled the instant he was outside the Villa del Reale to traverse the distance. He did not even know where he was; he only knew that he was under lock and key and closely watched. The villainous old hag who brought him his meals simply shook her head when interrogated; but Wheldrake could see, whenever the door was opened, there were always a couple of men on the alert to prevent anything like a sudden sortie on his part. Once or twice he had turned over in his mind the feasibility of a rush for freedom the next time the door was opened; but then he reflected that these double sentinels had plenty of comrades in all likelihood within call, and that, if he temporarily escaped from them, he had not the faintest idea of where he was.

One thing struck him as singular, and went far to prove that his captors were acting under the orders of Patroceni: all his personal property had been respected; watch, money, and rings no one had ever attempted to interfere with, though he had detected more than one rapacious glance cast at his watch and chain by those who guarded him; also he was treated with marked deference and civility. Squalid as was the room in which he was confined, there was an evident

clumsy attempt to smarten it up: while the food and wine supplied were far superior to the surroundings. Two or three days passed in this wise. Every morning he was visited by a man, not one of his captors, who, though courteously apologising for what he was pleased to term Wheldrake's inevitable detention, yet was always solicitous that any reasonable desire of his should be attended to, with the exception of restoring him his liberty. Papers, books, anything he demanded, with the exception of writing-materials, to lighten his squalid captivity were freely supplied him; but vainly did he demand what was the reason of his unwarranted imprisonment. His head-gaoler simply shrugged his shoulders. His orders were that the prisoner should be made as comfortable as the circumstances admitted. When Wheldrake threatened that his country would demand severe account from the authors of this outrage, the supple Italian simply bowed and replied,

"Signor, I merely obey my orders. Has signor any further commands for me to-day?"

"Yes. Why have I been thus kidnapped? When am I to be released?" he demanded hotly one morning.

"Ah, signor, I am but a subordinate, and do not know. My instructions are only to do the best I can to make your temporary detention as endurable as possible. It is with my superiors your friends or Government must reckon. But we are not much afraid of English interference on behalf of her citizens. Were you French or German it might be a different matter; *civis Romanus sum* hardly applies to your people."

Wheldrake started. This man, who claimed such knowledge of foreign politics, who was he? Of education undoubtedly, and yet his dress hardly warranted the belief that he belonged to anything superior much to those *quasi*-farmers who had kidnapped him in the Villa del Reale.

But to cross-examination the man was impervious, meeting every question with an imperturbable *Si, signor*, unless it related to something requisite to Wheldrake's comfort,

when he at once assured him it should be promptly attended to.

Life had seemed pretty dreary before, but life in such squalid captivity as this was unendurable. In vain did he question his gaolers; they deprecated his wrath, implored his excellency to have patience, that he would be removed into the country in a few days, and have then no cause to complain of his accommodation; for the present, and here the head-warder shrugged his shoulders, they were doing their best to make things comfortable for him. It was a puzzle what could be Patroceni's reason for thus persecuting him. A few days elapsed, and, growing dreadfully weary of his incarceration, Wheldrake was revolving in his mind many schemes for escape—that he was vigilantly guarded and escape by no means easy he had ascertained without doubt—when his head-guardian announced to him at dinner, "The signor's annoyance is nearly ended; to-morrow he will be removed into the country, and then the remainder of his detention will be a mere nothing; there we shall be able to give the signor the accommodation and fresh air we regret so much we are unable to afford him here."

"But why am I detained, as you call it? What is it you want of me? I am a prisoner, apparently for no reason."

"Ah! signor, that will be explained to you in a day or two. If the signor will have patience a little, two days more and he will understand all."

If Wheldrake had been weary of his life before, and with such a terrible and unmerited crash as had come to him it might be so, he was getting insufferably sick of it under present circumstances; but there was the wholesome difference in his feelings that instead of that dark apathy to things in general he now felt a healthy irritability at his enforced inaction. He was really taking a compulsory tonic, a medicine served out to us at times by the Fates without our in the least understanding it. Sloth and sluggishness have more than once been dissipated by such incentive to

work as pecuniary difficulties; and, little as we may think it, the breaking of the bank that contains most of our eggs is not altogether bad for us at times. Wheldrake began to busy himself about compassing his escape. To bribe one of his gaolers was obviously the easiest way to effect this, and so communicate with the outer world; but then, unfortunately, Wheldrake had no outer world to communicate with. He knew no one in Naples. His sole chance lay in Chisel. He had sent for his valet to London only a few weeks back, to that servant's great delight. He had left him at the inn at Pompeii, with instructions to follow with the baggage, and go to a leading hotel in Naples. Chisel was a shrewd man, and would be likely to raise considerable inquiry about the disappearance of his master. But, on the other hand, Wheldrake knew pretty well what the Italian police were, and that a case brought to them by a servant would be investigated with a deliberation that left little hope for the person chiefly interested. Plenty of time for his making a decent ending before the police took the matter into serious consideration. It was curious and characteristic of the ins and outs of human nature. Two weeks ago, and Wheldrake would have declared it mattered nothing what became of him. Now, on the contrary, it was a matter of great moment he should obtain his freedom.

His obtaining his freedom was subject of conjecture; but his changing the hot stifling room in which he was confined was, as his head-gaoler assured him, an affair of days.

"To-morrow, signor, you will leave this for the country. I regret that we shall be compelled to disturb you at daybreak," said the apparent chief of his immediate captors, and who was treated with great deference by his subordinates, under the title of Signor Sarini; "but it is rather a long and tedious journey. The roads are not quite what they should be. Still I feel sure you will appreciate the pure air and lovely scenery of the place you are about to visit."

"Visit!" rejoined Wheldrake, fiercely. "The place to which I am to be dragged, in defiance of all law and justice. What is it you seek—my life, my money—say? It is hardly worth while to remove me out of this room to take either the one or the other."

"Don't be so bitter, signor. There are reasons for your temporary detention; but, believe me, your life is in no danger."

"And by what right do you deprive me of my liberty?" asked Wheldrake, angrily.

"Ah, signor, by that great right which is the cause of most injustice on this earth—the right of the strong to oppress the weak. You are in our hands as the people are for the most part in the hands of their rulers. Did the Bourbons, think you, show much mercy during their rule over us? Ah, signor, neither life, property, nor the honour of our wives and daughters were safe while those tyrants had power to gratify their caprices. At daybreak to-morrow, Excellency."

It was now evident to Wheldrake that he was in the hands of a somewhat mixed community; that, while the subordinates could claim no higher rank than that of ordinary bandits, their chiefs were men who had been concerned prominently in the great revolutionary movement that took its rise in '48. He had always heard Patroceni credited with being deeply involved in all the many convulsions that Italy went through before shaking off the yoke of the worst race that, perhaps with the exception of the Stuarts, ever were set over their fellows.

Wheldrake was roused at daybreak the next morning, and informed that he had a short half-hour to swallow the coffee brought to him, and prepare for his journey. He was soon up and ready. Sarini escorted him downstairs with all the deference and courtesy that a groom of the chambers might have shown, but Wheldrake caught sight of divers "respectable farmers" about, two of whom occupied the box of the

carriage, and two more who were prepared to accompany it on horseback. There was no help for it; he was off apparently to spend a few days with his Excellency, Count Patroceni.

CHAPTER XV.

MAUDE'S MISGIVINGS.

"When I travel," said Mrs. Fullerton, "I do like to see what there is to be seen. Did not somebody say, 'See Naples and die'? I don't want to. I want to see Herculaneum and Pompeii, and get up no end of enthusiasm about those grand old Romans."

"Awfully over-rated race!" rejoined Glanfield, who was lounging in the window of the hotel sitting-room, and languidly surveying the vagaries of the Villa del Reale, and the bright blue waters of the famous Bay in the background.

"Mr. Glanfield!" exclaimed the widow, "do you really mean you have no veneration for the past, and one of the nations that have bequeathed us the chief elements of civilisation?"

"Beg pardon, Mrs. Fullerton, but I havn't any great veneration for the past, especially for a people whose ideas about horse-racing seem to have been so lamentably crude. The Greeks, with their Olympiads, were a long way in front of them. The Romans were simply a fraud."

"Mr. Glanfield, how can you talk such nonsense?" replied the widow, briskly. "Nobody disputes the Romans were a great race."

"No," rejoined Glanfield, drily, "because nobody, as a rule, takes the trouble to think. They went about the world colonising, just as we do; thrashed what they were pleased to term the 'barbarians,' just as we thrash the Abyssinians or Ashantees, who have neither arms nor discipline to cope

with us; bragged about the success of their armies just as we do: the success being the result of the trained, practised gladiator against the undisciplined, ignorant yokel. All mere force. They were pretty good road-makers, and that's all. We have had a man or two pretty good in the same line—Wade, only remembered by the old epigram—

> 'If you'd seen these roads before they were made,
> You would call down blessings on General Wade.'

And MacAdam, who I curse with all my heart, whenever I am in London, for the state his system has reduced some thoroughfare or other essential to my happiness."

"Mr. Glanfield, you don't mean really to pretend these are your real sentiments?"

"Mr. Glanfield must have had a respect for Horace and Virgil knocked into him at Harrow," said Maude, laughing.

"Now that's just what he hadn't," replied Glanfield. "I'd a great dislike of those poets pretty roughly instilled into me. I learnt to hate Virgil with his prosing about the pious Æneas, who, by the way, was no better than the rest of us when he got the slightest temptation to bolt out of the course; and as for Horace, he was no doubt a jolly good fellow, but the more we knew of him the less respect we felt for him."

"They were a grand race, Mr. Glanfield," said Mrs. Fullerton, with much dignity; "and I intend to see those relics of their greatness at Herculaneum and Pompeii."

"Quite right!" replied Mr. Glanfield; "there are some relics of their greatness there not shown as a rule to ladies. Another curious thing to show how little new there is under the sun, they loaded their dice quite as artistically as any macer in London could now."

"Macer!" exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton.

"I beg your pardon. I mean a man who does not always play on the square; one might say rarely."

"Well," said Sir Jasper, laughing, "we must see these

places of course, and, from all I can gather, Glanfield will prove a first-rate *cicerone*."

At this moment Hammerton entered the apartment, and, upon being informed of the subject of discussion, said emphatically,—"Of course we must go to Pompeii—nobody ever comes to Naples without doing it. I will arrange all about the carriages, &c., to-morrow."

"Fancy we had better have an escort, Hammerton; there are a good many of the light-fingered gentry about; some of the revolutionaries of '48 and the following years, who pick up a precarious living by entrapping the unwary."

"Brigands! pooh, nonsense; the age of brigandage has gone by. An escort would be a bore and superfluity ——"

"Don't know about a bore," rejoined Glanfield, quietly. "A compulsory residence in the mountains, with a good deal of money to pay for one's release, would be a greater nuisance."

"My dear Glanfield, this is a thing of the past, I assure you. Brigandage is a thing almost unknown in the present day."

"These old—well, what shall I say?—habits or vices die hard. People are very conservative over such little matters, and are wont to think the exaction of tribute from the passing stranger a laudable custom. We do it in London, only in a different fashion—overcharge him in the bill. Same thing, only more delicately put to him."

"But surely, Mr. Glanfield," exclaimed Maude, "brigands really are merely legendary in these days."

"Just the sort of legend you find still in full bloom in this sort of country. However, Hammerton knows the Continent much better than I do; if he don't think an escort necessary no doubt it isn't."

"All rubbish, paying a lot of greasy, swaggering beggars to pretend there's danger. No, no, we can take care of ourselves. An impudent mendicant is about the most obtrusive brigand we are likely to run across."

"Just what these fellows are—impudent mendicants got together—mendicants who've swarmed," said Glanfield. "However, they're probably things of the past, though it might be as well to inquire of the police on the subject."

"Never any use consulting the police in this country on such a subject. They either don't know, or are in collusion with the enemy. Take my word for it, all this sort of thing is quite of the past."

"Very good, then," interposed Sir Jasper. "We'll make an excursion to Pompeii to-morrow. You'll see about all the necessary arrangements, Fred?"

"All right, uncle. You will enjoy our excursion immensely, Maude. With your veneration for the ancients it is sure to interest you."

A pained look shot across the girl's face, not unnoticed by Mrs. Fullerton, who rightly interpreted it. She knew her niece was thinking of Cyril, with whom this very trip ought to have been taken. It was curious how by mere choice Maude drifted along the very path which Wheldrake in all the elation of his triumph had proposed should constitute his bridal-tour. Had Hammerton reflected on all this, he was shrewd enough to understand, that, if you wish a girl to forget, it is stupid to take her amongst scenes or surroundings that infallibly recall her lost lover to her recollection. Maude was slowly awakening to the fact that her cousin wished her to be something more than that to him, and the idea frightened the girl. To her it seemed like sacrilege to think that the memory of Cyril could be so soon put on one side; she could hardly even believe that Hammerton himself could wish it. Surely if the love was worth winning it could not be transferred with such rapidity as this would amount to; yet still she fancied that her cousin unmistakably desired to fill Cyril's place. This reason alone would have sufficed to make the tour distasteful to her, and yet she knew it could scarcely be brought to an abrupt conclusion. It was not easy for the girl under present cir-

cumstances to avoid Fred Hammerton's attentions. He was cunning, insomuch as he kept upon that borderland which never quite committed him. He could always fall back with the assertion that his attentions were merely cousinly; but Maude knew just as well as Hammerton himself did that they were calculated to mislead the lookers-on; that friends who had met them exchanged significant glances when they saw Hammerton talking to her; and nothing corroborated this idea so much as the fact that even her aunt, Mrs. Fullerton, who enjoyed most of her confidence, was evidently rather staggered. Mrs. Fullerton had believed that her niece was still staunch to her old love; but so insidious was Hammerton in his attentions that even she began to doubt whether Maude did not tacitly encourage them. The girl's sole defence under these circumstances consisted in Mr. Glanfield, and even that to a great extent failed her. It was all very well to affect a desire for his society in order to ward off Hammerton's attentions, but then Glanfield was considerably monopolised by her aunt, and, what is more, seemed to submit to that monopoly with much satisfaction. If Mrs. Fullerton's intention was matrimony there was no doubt that this trip gave her vast opportunities. Glanfield, deprived of what might be called his natural resource, racing, submitted himself to the widow's dictation without resistance. She amused him, and that to an Englishman thrown adrift on the Continent means much. He hated sight-seeing, cared nothing whatever about picture-galleries, spoke no language but his own, and had that fine insular contempt for foreigners very prevalent about the beginning of the century, therefore to him Mrs. Fullerton was rapidly becoming a necessity; no more insidious way than this of conquering the confirmed bachelor. He doesn't mean matrimony in the least—he simply drifts into it. Girls think that a good tennis-player or ball-room partner is a great attraction to a man; but if they wish he should think seriously of marrying let them teach him to value their society rather higher than

that—let him find that their absence makes his days dreary. We all know what it costs to abandon an accustomed luxury, and perhaps no greater luxury exists than the companionship of a clever woman.

Hammerton set himself to work that afternoon to make every arrangement for an excursion to Pompeii. He gave all the necessary orders about carriages, and, though scorning to consult the police, did make some inquiries as to the possibility of encountering brigands, but it was very difficult to get anything like a straightforward answer from the people of the hotel. Gentlemen took escorts and gentlemen did not. There was no reason to suppose there was any necessity to do so, but of course the signor would do as he thought best; upon which Hammerton pooh-poohed all ideas of an escort, and ordered the carriages for the next morning.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COUNT AT HOME.

After a drive of about an hour the carriage which contained Wheldrake came to a stop, and it was intimated to him that he was to alight. The carriage was sent back to Naples, and Signor Sarini informed him that he would have to accomplish the remainder of his journey on foot. To his inquiry of whether they had far to go, he was told some distance. He fancied he recognised the road to Pompeii, but his captors speedily left the high road and struck into paths known only to themselves. Some half-dozen rough-looking men of the peasant type, but all well armed, and evidently resolved to stand no nonsense, surrounded him. Wheldrake was an active young man, in his prime and accustomed to hard exercise, but he found it taxed his powers to keep pace with his companions, who, he gathered, had strong reasons for haste. Now and again they stopped and

anxiously interrogated the goat-herds whom they occasionally passed. Apparently the answers they received were satisfactory, for, as they put a further distance between themselves and Naples, they sensibly relaxed their speed. The country through which they were passing now was wild and mountainous, but well wooded and evidently very sparsely inhabited; and it was clear to Wheldrake that he was being hurried further and further from the haunts of men, though with what object he was unable to conjecture. His rough tourist suit and laced boots were not calculated to give the idea of his being a man of property; while at the same time, had it been intended to treat him in ordinary brigand fashion, it was strange he should have been allowed to retain his watch and what money he had about him. He could hardly have been regarded as a man able to pay a heavy ransom, unless his captors had some private information about him which led them to suppose him likely to meet a pretty stiff estimate as to the price of his freedom. Still, foreigners always have an exaggerated idea of an Englishman's wealth. And another thing Wheldrake did not know was, that the particular class of foreigners with whom he was at present travelling always believe that an Englishman's country will in the end be sure to find the sum necessary for his redemption. It was quite in accordance with all he ever had heard of the customs of brigandage to hurry its prisoners to the mountains while entering into negociations for their release. In short, the more he turned it over in his mind the less conclusion Wheldrake was able to come to as to the cause of his captivity. At last his captors stopped for the night near a spring of clear water, by the side of which stood a rough-looking hovel. A shrill whistle given by one of their party was speedily replied to, and their numbers were augmented by two more gentlemen of similar appearance to themselves. A short hurried conversation with the new-comers ended in their producing some provisions and wine-flasks from the interior of the unpromising-looking hut; and Wheldrake was

then invited to partake of a rough but substantial supper, and, that despatched, was given to understand that he was at liberty to go to sleep whenever he pleased. As for the brigands, they threw themselves on the ground like men thoroughly habituated to sleeping in the open air, not forgetting to leave one of their number as sentry. Wheldrake, who was thoroughly tired with his journey, speedily followed their example. Escape would have been no easy thing even if he had felt disposed to attempt it. He would have had not only to defy the vigilance of the sentry, but, in a country totally unknown to him, would in all probability have been speedily recaptured. As it was, he slept sounder than he had done since first made a prisoner. His companions were up at daybreak, and, after a hasty meal, once more resumed their journey. In answer to his inquiries he was told that he would reach his destination in the course of the day. It was pretty much a repetition of yesterday's journey, but towards the afternoon his captors were evidently nearing their halting-place. At last, after climbing a hill clothed with thickish wood, they emerged on a grassy plateau which was evidently their head-quarters. The encampment was small, and the probability was that the hardy ruffians who resided there slept for the most part with the sky for their canopy. Still on the left was a neat well-built hut, whilst on the right were a couple of good-sized tents. On this same side were the traces of small fires which had probably been used for cooking purposes. In the foreground, scattered about, were some fourteen or fifteen men, sleeping, smoking, cleaning their arms, or playing cards. On the upper part of the plateau at the back of the hut might be seen an easy chair and a small table, on which were some few books and writing-materials, and it was noticeable that this portion of the plateau seemed carefully avoided by the whole band. The chair was empty, nor was any one visible at the open doors of either hut or tents. There was a brief conversation between Sarini and one or two of the denizens of the encamp-

ment, and then Wheldrake was ordered to enter the tent on the extreme right of the plateau. It was evident that some preparations had been made for his reception, although somewhat of the roughest. A truckle-bed, a rough table and a chair, and some scanty washing apparatus on an empty packing-case in one corner of the marquee, constituted the furniture; but on the table was a well-worn edition of "Gil Blas," together with a couple of French novels and a pack of cards. Wheldrake was then informed by Sarini that he would not be permitted to leave the tent without permission; and, pointing significantly to the sentry at the door, added he trusted the signor would make no infringement upon that order, and so avoid all disagreeable consequences. His Excellency would be at once informed of his (Wheldrake's) arrival, and it was very probable would be anxious to see him before long.

Wheldrake had not long to wait. He was considerately allowed an hour or so to rest, and then Sarini once more appeared and requested Wheldrake to follow him. A singular *tableau* was presented to the eye as they emerged from the marquee. Seated in the chair at the back of the plateau was a man whom Wheldrake immediately recognised as Patroceni. On the other side of the table was Giovanni, standing in the attitude of one who has made up his mind to face the consequences of his misdeeds with determination. Between him and Patroceni was a man speaking volubly and with all that rapid gesticulation common to the Italian when moved; while grouped around at a respectful distance, but listening intently to Matteo's animated description, were the remainder of the band, numbering between twenty and thirty. Wheldrake spoke Italian indifferently, but like most people understood it much better than he could speak it. Besides, Matteo's animated pantomime showed that he was telling the story of Giovanni's frailty. At last he ceased, and the brigands craned eagerly forward to see the next act of the drama.

Patroceni rose quietly from his chair, and in a moment his deep-toned voice rang clear and resonant through the pure mountain air.

"Giovanni," he said, "you know our laws; the one you have broken is punishable more or less in every military brotherhood that ever existed. Among men who carry their lives in their hands, like ourselves, the penalty is death. The drunkenness of any one of us on service may result in the destruction of the remainder. I have spared your life, forfeited for this transgression already once, in consideration of the good service you did that day at Amalfi. This time I mean to give you a bare chance of it. I ought to shoot you where you stand, but instead I'll try the thickness of that numskull of yours, and may God grant it to be thick enough to save you from the fate you merit!" and as he spoke the Count, who was habited in rather a dandified bandit attire, drew a pistol from his belt, and, taking it by the barrel, dealt Giovanni a blow with the butt that stretched the brigand senseless on the grass.

A long-drawn breath went up from the lookers-on.

"Santo Diavolo! but his Excellency strikes hard," muttered one of them. "He might as well have shot him at once; he'll never recover from such a crack on the head as that."

"Tush! Giovanni's skull is pretty thick, and, though it may ache for some two or three days, he will be well enough again in a week," rejoined another.

"He'll carry the mark of the Count's handwriting to his grave whether he recover or no," said a third.

"Pleasant this!" thought Wheldrake. "The last time I met this man I called him a liar. The vengeful disposition of the Italians is proverbial, and I am utterly in his power."

"Take him away, some of you," said the Count with a wave of his hand at the prostrate bandit, "and if necessary bury him. Matteo, you have done good service, and those

that serve me well know that I am not forgetful. Return now to Naples in case the information you bring should again prove of no use. The excursion of the English lord has been postponed once, and, in spite of what you hear, may be postponed again. Get back as quickly as you can and be all eyes and ears."

With a low reverence Matteo turned away, and, crossing the plateau, plunged into the wood, while with another wave of his hand Patroceni dismissed his band. Wheldrake was about also to return to his tent when a quiet "The signor will remain" caused him to retain his ground.

"Ah, Sarini," said the Count, suavely, "I see you have persuaded this shy friend of mine to at last visit me. The last time we met he expressed a desire to do so. He had had a bad night at cards and was anxious for his revenge. Welcome, Signor Wheldrake, to my country-seat. You must take us a little in the rough, but you shall have the best we can give you."

"I am your prisoner, Count Patroceni, and of course at your mercy," rejoined Wheldrake. "I flung hard words at your head the last time we met, and, from what I have just witnessed, have little doubt I shall now have to reckon for them."

"Ah!" said the Count, proudly, "that shows how little you understand me. Words of insult I settle with the utterer, man for man, as is customary between gentlemen. You are here, sir, chiefly because you took advantage of a fool's inebriety to learn my secrets. I wished to meet you for reasons of my own, but you may thank your own curiosity mainly for your present detention."

"And may I ask how long that is likely to last?" inquired Wheldrake.

"I regret I cannot quite say," replied the Count. "I am daily expecting some friends of yours. Ah, yes, Signor Wheldrake, you will find it quite a family party. It will quite recall Wrottsley to your recollection, though I am

afraid I can't give you quite such a day's shooting as we had that day at the what-you-call-it—Clanger's, Sanger's, or something like that."

"Hangers," said Wheldrake, shortly.

"Ah, yes; if I could only ask that clergyman who got angry it would be quite complete," continued the Count, laughing heartily.

"You issue your invitations in a somewhat singular fashion," rejoined Wheldrake, curtly.

"True," replied the Count. "I hate refusals. I always send *pressing* invitations."

"I presume my detention is a mere question of money?" rejoined Wheldrake, haughtily; "and, if so, Count Patroceni, the sooner you acquaint me with the conditions of my release the better I shall be pleased."

"Oh, fie! Signor Wheldrake. You are scarcely courteous. Do you take me for an innkeeper who sends in his bill when his guest calls for it? No; you will partake of my hospitality for a few days. I have quite a pleasant party to meet you when we are all assembled. Any books I have are at your disposal, although I am sorry to say my library here is somewhat limited. Besides, we will have a little baccarat to while away the time. Signor Sarini here is fond of the game, and an accomplished player at it. For the present, Signor Wheldrake, I have the honour to wish you adieu," and with a quiet bow Patroceni turned and walked away in the direction of the hut.

"I think, signor," said Sarini, "you cannot do better than follow his Excellency's example,"—a hint with which Wheldrake immediately complied.

What can it all mean? he thought, as he seated himself on his bed. He brands me cheat and cardsharper at Wrottsley, and now proposes to play baccarat with me again.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN EXCURSION TO AMALFI.

The sudden indisposition of Maude had postponed the contemplated excursion to Pompeii. She had had a slight feverish attack, and the doctors prescribed quiet, but the girl soon rallied, and Mrs. Fullerton became once more anxious to get on classic ground.

"My dear Maude," exclaimed that vivacious lady, "I do think now that you are well enough to take part in our contemplated expedition to Pompeii."

"Quite, auntie, and as anxious for it as you can be. I am quite equal to starting to-morrow, if it can be arranged."

"I must speak to Fred about it," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton. "He organised the affair before, and no doubt will do so again. I wonder whether he could manage it for to-morrow."

Hammerton, upon being appealed to, declared there was no difficulty about it whatever, but suggested they should make a regular outing of it; see Pompeii, &c., and then go on to Amalfi, sleep there, and return next day. "It will be a delightful excursion, if you don't mind roughing it a little ——"

"Oh, no," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton, gaily; "I am quite good for that. We women can always bear the loss of our little comforts with much greater resignation than you men. Oh dear! how you do groan if there is any rumpling of the rose-leaves ——"

"Know one point, though," remarked Glanfield, putting up his eye-glass, "we rather beat you on. We bear being disappointed by our tailor better than you bear being disappointed by your milliner."

"Of course you do," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton. "Our dress is a matter of paramount importance; yours quite a secondary

consideration. However, Maude, I suppose we needn't adorn much for this trip."

"I don't know," said Glanfield. "Messieurs the brigands may be connoisseurs in female beauty, and in case of accidents we shall look to the influence of your charms to protect us."

"Don't, pray, talk such nonsense, Glanfield. You are only making the ladies causelessly nervous. I was talking the other day to an intelligent fellow, who keeps one of the pavilions in the Villa del Reale, and where I often take a cup of coffee, and he quite smiled at the idea of brigands between this and Amalfi. No, I'll order the carriages for to-morrow, if that'll do, uncle?"

"That will suit everybody, I think," replied Sir Jasper. "You must make up your mind to do without your maids, ladies."

"It's a trial," said Mrs. Fullerton, with much resignation; "but for once ——"

"You must make up your mind to appear as God made you," interrupted Glanfield.

"The monster!" cried the widow. "Do you hear him, Maude? Mr. Glanfield would insinuate that he has never seen us save as fashioned by our maids."

"Ten thousand pardons, Mrs. Fullerton. You don't understand me. Beauty, when unadorned, &c., is all a mistake. A pretty woman looks all the better for the assistance of the milliner. A pretty woman, well-groomed—I mean well-dressed—is far better worth looking at than the Venus of Milo. I haven't seen it, and don't want to, but Lord Byron, I presume, had, and I agree with him. Doesn't he say—

> 'I've seen live women, ripe and real,
> Worth all the wonders of their stone ideal,'

or something like it?"

The widow was completely mollified by this change of front. She was many years younger than her brother, and

knew that she was a very good-looking woman still, albeit a little full-blown. She smiled sweetly on Mr. Glanfield as she replied:—

"Well, for once it is understood we dispense with the accessories of the toilet. What sacrifices we make, Maude, in our pursuit of the antique!"

"Which is contrary to the custom of your sex, Clara. Woman usually makes her sacrifices to avoid the antique;" and the baronet chuckled heartily at his own joke. "I shall only take Jackson, then; we shall find one servant useful," and, so saying, Sir Jasper left the room.

"Jackson useful!" ejaculated Hammerton as the door closed. "Why the obstinate old fool has ceased to be that for many years, but here he's a positive encumbrance. I declare he takes as much looking after as all the rest of you. Isn't it so, Glanfield?"

"Yes; high time he was taken out of harness and turned out to grass," responded that gentleman.

"Which means, Mr. Glanfield ——?" said Mrs. Fullerton, sternly.

"Beg pardon, I forgot myself: that it is about time old Jackson was pensioned off. There is no tyranny so unsupportable as that of an old servant."

"Poor old Jackson!" interposed Maude, indignantly. "I won't have him run down in this way. Why, I can recollect him as long as I can recollect anything. He used to give me surreptitious sweetmeats when I was a child. He can't help growing old, and it would hurt him dreadfully to suggest that he was not as fit for his work as formerly. Of course out here he don't understand things."

"He understands how to grumble," retorted Hammerton, for an instant forgetting his *rôle* of lover; "a more cross-grained old brute and intolerable nuisance people travelling for amusement never were burdened with."

"Considering you've known him from a boy, Fred, you might have a little more patience with the old man's

infirmities," retorted Maude, and with a slight toss of her head she left the room.

Hammerton saw his mistake at once, but he had been so long accustomed to patronise his cousin that to play the lover came a little difficult to him. He occasionally forgot his part, and, anxious not to accept him in that character, Maude, with feminine quickness, invariably pounced upon such opportunities as this gave her.

"Who would have thought of Maude taking up the cudgels so hotly on behalf of that imbecile?" exclaimed Hammerton, with a rather forced laugh. "But I must go and see about the carriages for to-morrow."

"If Fred is really making love to Maude, he rather put his foot in it that time," remarked Mrs. Fullerton, after Hammerton had left the room.

"Why you surely don't think for one moment that he has the slightest notion of anything of that sort?" exclaimed Glanfield.

"Yes, I think he has a great idea of something of that sort," replied the widow, mimicking him. "I've no more doubt that he is making love to Maude than I have that you are making love to me."

"What!" cried Mr. Glanfield, almost bounding from his chair.

"Oh, don't be frightened," said Mrs. Fullerton, with a ringing laugh. "I know you mean nothing by it, and I don't mind it. You look quite overcome by the discovery: ring for a glass of wine," and with another peal of laughter the widow made her exit.

As for Mr. Glanfield, he remained for some minutes in a state of almost stupor. If he had been making love it had been most unwittingly. Absurd! This must be some of Mrs. Fullerton's badinage. She was a charming woman, a most agreeable companion. He had enjoyed her society extremely, despite her perpetually finding fault with his racing slang, but hang it all! no, he'd never made love to

her. Then was she right about Hammerton's making love to Maude? Glanfield was very fond of Maude, and had but a very poor opinion of Hammerton. It was the instinctive repugnance a high-minded honourable man has for one whose ways are crooked; and, though Glanfield had never heard anything alleged against Fred Hammerton, he felt pretty sure that he was tolerably unscrupulous. He did not at all relish the idea of his pet Maude being won by such a man as he deemed Hammerton to be. Still, surely she could not have forgotten Cyril Wheldrake; and here Mr. Glanfield shook his head, and, with the mental observation of how much more difficult women were to understand than horses, strolled out of the sitting-room.

The next morning at an early hour the whole party were astir and ready for their expedition. It was resolved that Sir Jasper and Hammerton should occupy the first carriage, with Jackson on the box, while Mrs. Fullerton, Maude, and Glanfield followed in the second. It had been settled that they should travel in light marching order, so that the *impedimenta*, including a comfortable basket of comestibles and a hamper of wine, were soon comfortably packed away.

Opposite the hotel door a man was adjusting the bridle of his horse. He was on the far side of the road, near one of the gates of the Villa del Reale, and that bridle had for some time apparently puzzled him—no getting it to his liking anyhow; but as the carriages rolled beneath the portico of the hotel that discontented horseman seemed to solve the Gordian knot. In another moment that bridle was adjusted, and, having swung himself into the saddle, the horseman rapidly disappeared in the direction of Pompeii.

"For'ard, for'ard!" cried Sir Jasper, as, accompanied by Glanfield, he made his appearance on the steps of the hotel.

"Good gracious, Jasper!" said his sister, as she emerged from the door immediately afterwards, glowing with satisfaction at the conviction that her neat travelling-dress was unimpeachable, "we're not going to cover, you know, and

the people here really do not understand the fox-hunter's shibboleth."

The fair widow was delightful. No male creature ever failed to some extent to yield to her fascinations, but her mission was to suppress sporting jargon, and she was staunch to her mission.

"I think we are really now quite ready, Maudie, eh?" she said, interrogatingly; "though, having required us to leave our handmaidens behind us, you can never expect us to be *quite* ready again till we return. Never mind, we are decked for the sacrifice."

"Rather nicely decked, too," remarked Glanfield; "you and Maude both look as fit as hands can make you."

"Fit! Mr. Glanfield," said the widow, with an assumption of intense gravity.

"Yes, fit as hands can make you," rejoined Glanfield, quite unabashed. "I suppose it is your milliners who do fit you, and that they have hands ——"

"Such equivocation as that, Mr. Glanfield, will be remembered against you," said Mrs. Fullerton, sternly, as she stepped into the carriage. "I regret it, but in justice to my sex I must retaliate on the first opportunity."

But Sir Jasper gave the signal for starting, and the carriages rolled onwards. After a delicious, though a somewhat hot drive, Pompeii was reached at last, and, after a cursory examination of its wondrous remains, the party snatched a hasty luncheon, and then proceeded to push on to Amalfi, promising themselves to complete their study of Pompeii on the return journey. Soon after leaving Pompeii a horseman passed them.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Hammerton, "I believe that is my friend of the pavilion in the Villa del Reale. Hi, Matteo—Signor Matteo!"

But the horseman, whoever he was, paid no heed to Hammerton's hail, but trotted on, and was soon lost round a turn of the road. They had got by this time in a well-wooded,

but hilly country, and were descending a steepish dip, at the bottom of which ran a brooklet, now some four or five feet wide, and perhaps as many inches in depth, but which it was easy to imagine an impassable torrent in winter. On the far side of this the road wound upwards through a thick wood—forest would perhaps better describe the mass of grand old trees and picturesque glades that fringed the ascent on either side.

Glanfield, who had sore misgivings that the days of brigandage were by no means over, was just thinking that if any of those gentry were about a more appropriate place in which to cry "Stand and deliver!" he had never set eyes on, when he heard the word "Stop"—that is to say its Italian equivalent—shouted in sonorous tones.

"Off your box, and go to your horses' heads, or I fire!" cried the speaker, sternly.

"Drive on, you scoundrel!" thundered Sir Jasper.

"Police! police!" shouted Jackson.

Glanfield sprang to his feet, and looked at the carriage in front. The driver had tumbled off his box with almost suspicious alacrity. Sir Jasper and Hammerton were standing up in the carriage, while on a small hillock at the end of the wood stood a man, whose carbine was now apparently levelled at Jackson, who was writhing on the box like a cockchafer with a pin through it, at the sight of that ominous barrel covering him at about twenty paces, and still continuing to vociferate police! as he would have done if assaulted in Mayfair. Across the road were drawn some half-dozen men, armed with muskets, who evidently only awaited the behests of their leader; while others were visible on the edge of the road on either side. Glanfield glanced back, but four sturdy ruffians resting on their guns barred retreat in that direction.

"Please don't be frightened!" he exclaimed. "They won't hurt us, but merely hold us prisoners till ransomed; but we are in the hands of brigands, caught like rats in a

trap. Resistance is useless, Sir Jasper," he shouted; "the rascals are in far too great force for us to make a fight of it."

"The signor is sensible," replied Sarini, for he was the leader of the bandits. "You are perfectly safe if you make no resistance. Struggle against the inevitable, and don't blame me if your skins suffer."

He spoke in Italian, but it was of course evident that he understood English.

"Glanfield is right," said Hammerton. "There is nothing for it but to submit. Four unarmed men can't fight twenty with guns in their hands. Hold your tongue, you old idiot; you don't suppose there's a gendarme within ten miles, do you?"

"There's a gun within ten yards, Mr. Fred, pointed dead at me. Do ask him to put it down. These foreigners are so careless with firearms."

Hammerton, who, with the exception of Mrs. Fullerton, was the only one of the party who could speak Italian, called out to Sarini that they surrendered, and the guns were then lowered. Sarini ordered them all to descend from the carriages. The brigands removed the baggage with a celerity that betokened much habitude to the unrighteous shifting of trunks and properties; and then the drivers of the carriages were sternly ordered to continue their way to Amalfi, and on no account to return before the third day from that time.

Sarini then intimated to Hammerton that the party must pursue its way on foot, that they had not far to go, and that in consideration of the ladies they would proceed leisurely, while old Jackson was given to understand that any further lifting of his voice would necessitate his being gagged.

"Do you think they'll draw our teeth, Mr. Glanfield, if we don't fork out sufficiently, like that king in the history of England did? He was a good deal in the bandit line, wasn't he, sir?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

MOUNTAIN LAW.

Two days passed, and Wheldrake saw nothing of Patroceni. Sarini, as at La Vicaria, visited him daily to inquire after his health and to ascertain if he required anything. He was allowed to stroll about the camp within certain limits, but saw that he was jealously guarded. Any desire he expressed that was within the power of his captors was at once gratified. In answer to his demand to see the Count, Sarini replied that his Excellency was much disappointed at the non-appearance of some English friends whom he had expected, and whose society he was sure would make the signor's visit most enjoyable, if the signor would only have a little patience. His Excellency was away just now on a little matter of business, but would be back that evening, and would no doubt call on the signor.

"But what is the object of keeping me in ignorance of the cause of my detention?"

"Pardon, signor; his Excellency explained that you had thrust yourself into his affairs—an imprudent liberty to take with a man of his stamp. His Excellency has many irons in the fire, apt to burn the fingers of people who meddle with them. Will the signor accept one bit of advice? In this country, at all events, don't be too curious about how people get their living," and with this Sarini made the prisoner a low bow and departed.

Yes, the bandit had no doubt the best of the argument. He, Wheldrake, had set himself deliberately to pump Giovanni with a view to ascertaining what Patroceni was; and, thanks to that worthy's pet infirmity, had discovered, as the Count said, too much. He certainly had the strongest of reasons for ascertaining what character Patroceni bore in his own country. But Sarini was right; it was evidently

best not to inquire too closely into a gentleman's profession in Italy. Then he wondered what had become of Chisel. The valet, he knew, would be sorely nonplussed at the disappearance of his master. He was a shrewd, quick-witted man, and in England would no doubt have made speedy and effectual inquiry as to what had become of him; but he laboured here under the great disadvantage of knowing nothing of the ways of the country, and being quite unable to speak the language. Then, again, Wheldrake reflected that the Italian police were not wont to put themselves in a fuss about anything, much less about the disappearance of a stray Englishman. No: he felt that he had little to hope from police interference in his behalf; besides, he had heard over and over again that in these cases of brigandage the police were just as often as not in collusion with the brigands. How it was all to end he knew not. Patroceni, to all intents and purposes, was supreme master of the situation. Then he was evidently expecting daily to capture Sir Jasper and his party. He could have but one object—the ordinary one of his profession—the exacting a heavy ransom; and apparently he preferred, in the language of the auction-room, "to put them up in the lump."

That evening, as Sarini had said, the Count made his appearance in Wheldrake's tent. After a few courteous inquiries after his health and the expression of some regret as to the dulness of the life which Wheldrake had been constrained to lead for the past two days, Patroceni continued: "It is most unfortunate, Mr. Wheldrake; but business took me from home and prevented my fulfilling my duties as a host; also our old friends from Wrottsley have so far disappointed me, but I think I can now promise they will be with me to-morrow. In the meantime, shall we while away the evening with a hand at cards? You used to be fond of baccarat—and—lucky at it!"

"By Heavens!" said Wheldrake, starting to his feet, "do you think it is safe to taunt the man you have ruined?

You are in the midst of your men, and have plenty of help within call, but remember I value my life not a rush. Another such gibe and I'll choke the coward's breath out of you, let the consequences to myself be what they may."

"Bah!" retorted the Count, with a contemptuous smile, "don't talk like a blustering schoolboy. Patroceni has proved his manhood on many a well-fought field and in many a personal encounter. Whatever he may be, the police can tell you he is no coward; besides," he added, touching significantly the hilt of the poignard he wore at his belt, "it is not likely I should ever require to call for assistance. Be patient, Signor Wheldrake, we will have a little game at baccarat. Once more I say be patient; it will interest you before we finish it. Sarini, Sarini!" he exclaimed, raising his voice, and that worthy speedily appeared at the tent door.

"Ah, Sarini," said the Count, "you are fond of a little baccarat; the signor complains that he finds the evenings dull here; we must exert such poor talents as we have to lighten them for him. Sit down, Mr. Wheldrake. Before we commence, how shall we play? On the square or on the cross?" Once more Wheldrake sprang to his feet.

"How dare you use such words to me? You well know that I was innocent of that juggling lie at Wrottsley. I decline to play cards with you; the supposition that I would play unfairly is an insult. I called you coward just now, sir. I was right. What can be more cowardly than to insult one who is completely in your power?"

"Pray be seated, signor; listen. In the civilised world in which you live there is a prejudice against dexterous manipulations of the cards. In the free air of the mountains we are above such petty considerations: we regard a man who cheats cleverly much as you do a fine whist-player. It is customary to settle beforehand which game you will play. The signor, Sarini, has decided to play upon the square."

"And suppose," exclaimed Wheldrake, now interested in spite of himself by the Count's cool cynicism, "after this arrangement any one should feel his old habits too strong for him, and should resort to unfair play, what then?"

"Ah! In the mountains that is attended with some danger; it would depend somewhat on whether he is detected, and a good deal upon the temper of the detector. As he is pretty certain to be detected we may say it turns on the latter point."

"And the consequences?" inquired Wheldrake.

"Would be a mere case whether the detector preferred shot or steel."

It was a glorious night. At a sign from the Count, Sarini threw open the door to its fullest extent, and the moonlight flooded the tent. Not a breath stirred the trees, and, with the exception of the distant sounds of voices and laughter from the main body of the brigands congregated some two hundred yards away at the further extremity of the plateau, not a sound broke the stillness. Wheldrake had noticed some little stir amongst the band during the day; there had been much furbishing of arms, oiling of locks, filling of water-bottles, &c. When one is forcibly idle one notices all such trivial circumstances; it was the preparation for such mimic war as these freebooters made. The locusts of crime who devour honest men's substance in all countries manifest much method in their rapacity, and surprise and deception are the very essence of robbery. It had struck Wheldrake that the "respectable farmers" were preparing to receive Sir Jasper and his party.

"Pray be seated, Sarini. I have now explained our mountain law to Signor Wheldrake. As you know, he has elected to play on the square; cheating is prohibited;" and as he spoke the Count shuffled the cards.

"Ah, your Excellency," said Sarini, with a low laugh, "you are aware that no one loves a turn with the cards more than I do; but, Excellency, do not forget that I must

be on the march two hours before daybreak, and would fain snatch two or three hours' sleep before leaving. We will play, but you will not make it late ?"

"Oh no, we will just while away two or three hours; as for the stakes, they are at Mr. Wheldrake's discretion."

Wheldrake hesitated for a moment; he did not in truth quite know what stake it would be judicious to name—whether that they had been accustomed to play at Wrottsley or something lower.

The Count cut the knot for him by suggesting the former, and in a few minutes the cards were cut, and Wheldrake in a state of bewilderment found himself playing baccarat with two brigands on the heights above Amalfi—a strange whirligig of chances! He little thought when he called Patroceni liar on that fatal night at Wrottsley that the next time he played cards with him would be by the light of the moon amidst scenery as lovely as Shakespeare paints the forest of Ardennes.

The game proceeded with various fluctuations at first, but it was not long before luck had apparently settled down in favour of Sarini, who scored deal after deal, and whom it seemed hopeless to bet against.

"Diavolo!" exclaimed the Count, "the cards come to your call, signor. It would be well for Mr. Wheldrake and myself that you were at rest."

"It shall be as you will, gentlemen, for another hour or so. I am a winner so far, but your Excellency knows business requires my early departure, and winner or loser must permit my retiring to rest then."

"Certainly, Sarini. Neither Mr. Wheldrake nor myself are such faint-hearted players that we cannot accept defeat. When the moon disappears behind the big clump of cedars we'll consider that the lights are out and the game played."

Sarini rose and went to the door of the tent, gazing out upon the glorious moonlight.

"Ah!" he said at length, still standing with his back to

the tent, "I have near two hours to give you yet, signors, in which to recover your losses."

"Pshaw! Monsieur Wheldrake, we will not take quite so long as that," hissed Patroceni across the table. "Not a word! Leave the thing to me, and I will show you an old trick of the game of baccarat;" and as he spoke, quick as lightning the Count produced two cards from his sleeve and slipped them amongst the notes Sarini had left on the table.

"Come, Sarini," continued he aloud, "if we have so short a time in which to recoup ourselves do not let us waste it. Pray keep your admiration of the prospect for some other evening."

There was another round or two of the cards, when suddenly Patroceni exclaimed: "Pardon, Signor Sarini, it was understood at the commencement of the game that the play was to be fair. You know our mountain law. To cheat or not to cheat is a declaration at starting from which we never swerve; you have, Signor Sarini; there are false cards amongst your notes. You must abide the usual consequence of an infraction of the game."

"If this be a jest of your Excellency's, I can only say I think such fooling ill-timed."

"Jest!" said the Count, fiercely; "do you call this a jest?" and as he spoke he tossed Sarini's pile of notes lightly over and discovered the cards he had placed there.

"Those who hide know where to find," remarked Sarini, perfectly unmoved. "Your Excellency's is a poor jest, and, as I am in no mood for buffoonery, I'll betake myself to rest."

"Ah, you intend to take advantage of my discovery to break off play, and retire with your winnings. Good, signor; I will take my revenge in another fashion. You will delay your journey some time, and give me ten minutes at daybreak to-morrow."

Sarini rose leisurely from the table, and gathered up the notes in front of him.

"We have fought side by side, Excellency, too often to doubt each other's manhood. If you are in the same way of thinking at daybreak, I will continue the game in the way you propose. I have the honour to wish you good night, gentlemen."

"Rather *au revoir*, Signor Sarini, till sunrise. 'Tis ill fencing with such a swordsman as yourself by moonlight."

Wheldrake's first impulse had been to spring to his feet, denounce the Count, and take Sarini's part, but he bethought him of the old adage that "when knaves quarrel honest men come by their own," and remained passive. In another minute the idea dawned upon him that this was a new comedy he was witnessing; a comedy got up for his especial edification, though with what motive he was at a loss to conjecture. The Count was unfathomable, but he felt pretty certain that Sarini was merely playing a part. The Count was a born actor, and could assume nearly any *rôle* he chose; and he had in his time played many parts. The rumours about him were perfectly true. Of a good Italian family, he had imbibed revolutionary principles in his youth, and been engaged ever since in every revolutionary movement of his country. He had been proscribed, imprisoned, condemned to death; his whole existence had been one of disguise and intrigue. He had gambled for political power all his life, and staked that life again and again fearlessly on the result. For if Patroceni desired a republic it was one in which he would be the ruling spirit. The old burlesque line rather describes his republican opinions—

"Let's all be equal. I'll be king."

Be that as it may, his sagacity and daring made him recognised as quite one of the leading revolutionary chiefs.

Sarini was also a man of good family, and of similar ideas. He had been Patroceni's right hand for years, standing in the same relation to him that Ney did to Napoleon. But he had neither the brains of the Count nor those wonderful

powers of personation that made Patroceni so dangerous a conspirator. He had played his part so ill to-night that Wheldrake had speedily detected the mockery of the quarrel, and recognised that it was but a comedy rehearsed for his special benefit.

"Good night, Mr. Wheldrake," said Patroceni, rising. "We are unfortunate in our baccarat. Something always arises to mar the harmony of the evening. Once more, good night!"

CHAPTER XIX.

"AN AL-FRESCO HOTEL."

The more Wheldrake thought over the scene of the preceding night the more convinced he was that the whole thing had been a pure comedy got up in his behoof. From his tent the next morning he could see Patroceni lounging, smoking, and reading or writing. Whatever had been the events of the morning he, at all events, was none the worse for them. And that threatened duel between him and Sarini? Wheldrake came to the conclusion it had never taken place, nor ever been intended to take place. The more he thought over it the more convinced he was that this was a mere rehearsal of the affair at Wrottsley; only upon this occasion he had been admitted behind the scenes, and allowed to see the machinery that had worked his ruin. But what object could Patroceni have, after blasting his life in England, in revealing to him the way in which it had been brought about? and, once more, what object could Patroceni have had in such a diabolical plot against one who had never injured him? From what he had seen of the Count he could imagine him vengeful, hard, relentless when crossed, but a man quite capable of even a magnanimous action, and, cateran though he was, he was

neither a vulgar scandal-monger nor common robber. From what Sarini had said, no doubt he would have Sir Jasper and his party in his keeping before many hours were over. This could scarcely mean but one thing—ransom; and it struck him that he could not do better than at once proceed to discuss that point with the Count. Having come to which conclusion he despatched a message at once to Patroceni to say that if he had leisure he should be glad to have a little conversation with him.

The Count speedily made his appearance, and suavely demanded if there was anything he could do for Mr. Wheldrake's comfort. "Any thing you like but baccarat, signor. That 'seems destined to end uncomfortably whenever you and I engage in it," said Patroceni, laughing.

"Pray be seated, Count," rejoined Wheldrake. "It is useless to resort to further subterfuge. I am your prisoner. Let me know at once in what light I am to regard myself. Am I a prisoner held up to ——"

"Stop!" interposed Patroceni. "Pray don't speak so coarsely of things. Regard yourself, pray, as a guest in the worst and most expensive hotel in Europe."

"I don't understand you," rejoined Wheldrake.

"I should have given you credit for being quicker. Having been obliged to trap you I shall have to charge for the trouble. Have a cigarette," and as he spoke the Count tendered the handsome silver case he habitually carried.

"I understand now—you demand a ransom?" rejoined Wheldrake.

"Precisely so," replied Patroceni, with a low bow. "My followers expect their little perquisites; grasping, perhaps, as country-house servants usually are, but not opening their mouths much wider than those of your own country."

"And if I refuse, my life, I presume, is the penalty."

"No, not necessarily," rejoined the Count, quietly, as he emitted a breath of pale blue smoke from beneath his

dark moustache. "We generally begin with a finger or a toe."

"You mean mutilation?"

"You are dreadfully coarse in your remarks, Mr. Wheldrake. A mere reminder to their friends that the matter is urgent."

"And if I refuse?"

"Bah, *mon ami*, people never do refuse."

"You have got a guest you never reckoned on," rejoined Wheldrake, sharply. "If I wanted to discover your whereabouts it was for another purpose. Life! No; I don't value mine much. You know as well as I do that the world is dead to me. You've caught a bird scarce worth the trapping, Count."

"The old, old story; but men change their note with the first—ahem—shall it be an ear or a finger? For old days I would wish to meet your views."

"Death has no terrors for me," rejoined Wheldrake, haughtily. "You are bargaining with a man for his life who would as lieve you took it."

"Try another cigarette," rejoined Patroceni, quietly. "Contempt for death is all very well in the abstract, or when one's blood is up. Coolly considered, there is considerable repugnance to parting with life. I speak from experience."

"It may be," said Wheldrake, musingly. "I am curious to see what value you put upon mine. Don't appraise it too highly, I warn you. The sunshine has gone out of it, and—I am fond of my relations."

"And, therefore, anxious to see them again," rejoined the Count, drily.

"On the contrary, more solicitous they should benefit by my death."

"You must excuse my saying your conversation is more witty than veracious. Our widows, our mistresses, or our

mothers, are the sole women, as a rule, we care to provide for. Mr. Wheldrake, to the best of my belief, is blessed with none of those ties."

"You think I am afraid to die," retorted Wheldrake, angrily.

"I think nothing of the kind," replied Patroceni, as he lit a fresh cigarette, "for the best of all possible reasons—I have never as yet thought about it. That you are in my hands is the result of your own curiosity. I've no wish to meddle with you, and have as yet not quite made up my mind as to what I'll do with you."

At this moment one of the bandits entered and whispered a few words into Patroceni's ear, whose face immediately lit up as a low laugh escaped him.

"Tell me the real story of that night at Wrottsley and I will willingly pay you five thousand pounds for my freedom."

"You are too late," returned the Count, blandly. "I must ask you to excuse me as I am expecting some friends of yours every minute. For the present, adieu."

As Patroceni strolled across to his hut he muttered, "You were wrong, Hammerton. Yes, very wrong; three thousand pounds, and you said no. Here's the other side already offering five. But, as matters stand, another quarter of an hour at the outside and I shall have fish in my net worth six times that. Thirty thousand," said the Count to himself as he rubbed his hands softly, "is a nice little windfall."

At this moment Pietro emerged from the wood, and, rapidly traversing the plateau, approached Patroceni.

"The travellers, Eccellenza. The English milord and party. We have them—they will be here directly," he said in a hoarse, hurried whisper.

The Count responded by a quiet authoritative nod of dismissal.

"Poor Sir Jasper!" he murmured, as he threw himself

into an armchair at the top of the plateau, and lit a fresh cigarette, "it seems a rather sorry return for his hospitality; but he is a philosopher, or a man of the world, which is better, and knows other countries have other customs. However, I don't want to meet my guests just yet, so shall go for a stroll at the back of the camp."

Patroceni had barely disappeared when Sir Jasper and his party appeared upon the plateau under the escort of Sarini and his myrmidons.

"You will pay for this, you scoundrels," said Sir Jasper, as he seated himself upon a fallen tree; "you are interfering with Englishmen remember, and the arm of England is long."

"We will take our chance of that. It is possible to be out of reach of the longest arm remember," rejoined Sarini, with a contemptuous smile. "Signors, pray be seated—you are at your journey's end," he continued, speaking in broken English.

"And these are brigands, Mr. Glanfield? Dear me, how exceedingly romantic! What will they do with us?"

"Empty our pockets to begin with, I suppose, and draw our bankers' accounts dry afterwards. Glad you find it romantic. Always thought a game at which I'd no chance to win prosaic in the extreme myself."

"I don't understand you," said the widow.

"Well, there's not much romance in attending a—a—a garden-party of this sort; it's expensive and uncomfortable. The sole interest I feel in the whole thing is as to what the bill will come to."

"Now, Fred, what are we to do? You know the country. These scamps want money, of course. If this is their chief," and Sir Jasper indicated Sarini, "tell him to let us know the worst at once. Ask him what will satisfy him."

"There's no great cause of alarm, uncle. Bled in the pocket we must expect to be. A couple of days' inconvenient bivouacking is all that is likely to happen to us. You will have to rough it with a vengeance, Maude, I fear."

"Oh, never mind me; I shall manage well enough; but, father, I have heard these men are at times hard to deal with. They fix their ransoms high, and are cruel if their terms are not speedily complied with."

"Don't fret, my dear," replied Sir Jasper. "Fred, let's see the leader of these men at once."

"That's it, Sir Jasper; that's it," cried Glanfield. "Now you," he continued, motioning to Sarini, "where are the stewards of this meeting? Put that into their jargon, Hammerton—the fools never understand English."

"And Italian wasn't taught when you went to school, except in the obsolete form of Latin," interposed Mrs. Fullerton.

"Well, I can't say I ever fancied myself much at Latin," replied Glanfield.

"Oh, dear, what a provoking man he is!" said Mrs. Fullerton to herself; "to fancy some one else is what is required of him."

Hammerton now moved across to Sarini, and, saying that he presumed he was the chief of the band in whose hands they were, was about to propose discussing their ransom with him when he was stopped by a rapid disclaimer on Sarini's part.

"No, signor! I am not the chief of these men—I am only second in command; but ah! here comes his Excellency to speak for himself;" and as he spoke he waved his hand in the direction of his hut, from behind which the Count was now seen approaching.

"Count Patroceni!" burst from all lips, as the party sprang simultaneously to their feet, while Jackson was heard to murmur, *sotto voce*, that there was no knowing where to have these foreigners.

"A surprise, gentlemen, doubtless," exclaimed the Count, with a low bow; "but fate—and business—draw people together all over the world. Depend upon it, ladies, you

shall be made as comfortable as circumstances will admit of during your stay with me."

"If this is a jest, Count, the sooner it is put an end to the better," said Hammerton, sternly.

"It is very odd," replied the Count, as if addressing an imaginary audience, "people always think I am jesting. If ever a man led a life of serious purpose I have done so. My dear friend, I keep an *al-fresco* hotel," he continued, addressing Hammerton, "and induce all travellers whom I can to visit my establishment. The air is bracing, and you will find both the wine and cookery fair. My guests always benefit much by their residence here. Upon one point only do we ever differ. After the manner of my class, I require all bills settled before leaving; and, as in other hostelries, there is sometimes a *mauvais quart d'heure* over that little affair."

"Does the man really mean he is chief of the bandits?" said Mrs. Fullerton.

"Yes; that's about his social position," replied Glanfield. "Now, Count," he continued, turning sharply to Patroceni, "the sooner we proceed to business the better. We know that we are in the rat-trap. How much for opening the door?"

"Oh, it's a pleasure to meet a real man of business," rejoined Patroceni. "What a lesson for you, *mon cher*," he added significantly in an aside to Hammerton. "Thirty thousand pounds will settle the bill for the whole party."

"Thirty thousand pounds!" ejaculated Glanfield "You must be mad, Count."

"Impossible!" almost screamed Mrs. Fullerton. "That means the pledging of our diamonds and sackcloth for years."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Sir Jasper; "you cannot seriously mean to place such a price upon our liberty?"

"Thirty thousand pounds!" said Hammerton. "What does this mean?"

In two or three strides Patroceni was by his side.

"It means, sir," he hissed into Hammerton's ear, "that you refused me my percentage on the portion of the bride I helped you to! It means that I intend to have it all now. It means that I consider the lady fair enough to be taken for her own sweet self."

"I say! this won't do, you know," exclaimed Glanfield. "We haven't won the Derby or anything of that sort. Thirty thousand pounds is a very large amount of money."

"Which you will speedily make up amongst you," replied the Count. "I will leave you to talk it over amongst yourselves; I hate intruding upon these little family arrangements. The ladies will find that hut all ready for their accommodation whenever they may wish to retire to it. For the present I will bid you adieu."

And with these words Patroceni retired towards the further tent.

"He surely cannot mean that he fixes our ransom at thirty thousand pounds?" said Sir Jasper, uneasily, after a considerable pause.

"Never saw a man who looked more determined to have his money. He had that particularly suave, courteous manner that always characterises the ruthless creditor. When they storm and bluster there's hope; but when they're so horribly silky they not only mean having their money, but having it pretty soon."

"You surely don't think, Mr. Glanfield, that Count Patroceni means to keep us here till we have raised such a monstrous sum as thirty thousand pounds? Surely, it is all braggadocio, and one or two thousand is the outside he would actually price our liberty at. Upon my word, Fred, you had better be a little more careful in future about the acquaintances you pick up abroad." And Mrs. Fullerton favoured her nephew with a glance which spoke volumes.

For the first time the party had awoke to the consciousness of the situation being serious. They were beginning to

recognise now that their freedom was not a matter of a few hundreds, with all the romance of having been for a few days in the hands of real bandits, but a matter of many thousands and detention till such time as so large a loan could be obtained; and, however good the security, thirty thousand pounds is a sum not to be raised at short notice without reference to the children of Israel.

"I'm afraid, aunt, I've made a great mistake," said Hammerton, humbly.

"By Jove, I should rather think you had. Your friend Patroceni's about the biggest welcher I've foregathered with for many a day," exclaimed Glanfield.

"Welcher, Mr. Glanfield!" cried Mrs. Fullerton.

"Beg pardon; no reflection on the Ancient Britons, though, no doubt, like most clotheless people, they collared everything that came in their way. I mean a class of men well known on the racecourse, who may be described as living by the snatch-and-skip business; pocket-picking would perhaps more accurately describe it to you."

"And you think the Count's in that line?" inquired Sir Jasper.

"Yes," replied Glanfield, drily, "and pretty well top of the class."

CHAPTER XX.

FIXING THE RANSOM.

At length it had fairly dawned upon the whole party that falling into the hands of Italian brigands had a really serious side to it; that, though their freedom might be only a matter of money, yet that it might be priced so highly as to make them poor for many a long day, if not for life. Thirty thousand pounds! They could raise it amongst them in time no doubt, but it would necessitate a long stay at Patroceni's *al-fresco* hotel; and they all began to recall

stories of the brutal treatment to which these scoundrels sometimes inflicted on their captives. Stories of mutilation, aye, of cold-blooded murder, occurred to them; and from treating their situation rather with jocularity they turned round and began to take a most gloomy view of their position. As Glanfield expressed it, "the starch was all out of their collars now."

"What are we to do?" exclaimed Sir Jasper.

"What will become of us? What will happen, Fred, if we do not pay all this money?" asked Maude, in quavering tones.

"We shall probably be detained till we have paid something," replied Hammerton. "We must come to some sort of arrangement with this fellow Patroceni."

"The fellow, bear in mind, was your intimate friend, and introduced by you to a London club, and to some slight extent to English society," said Glanfield, sharply.

"I should suggest Captain Hammerton exerts his influence, which is, of course, all powerful with this—this foreign nobleman," said Mrs. Fullerton, querulously.

"Don't be unkind, aunt. Fred was deceived, like the rest of us," interposed Maude, tearfully.

"Tell you what it is, Sir Jasper," remarked Glanfield, dogmatically: "there's only one thing to do, it appears to me, that is, to leave Hammerton and myself to make the best terms we can with his rascally friend. Here, you sir, where are you going to lodge us?"

Pietro, who chanced to be the brigand addressed, replied, "I will send the Signor Sarini."

"What the deuce does he say?" asked Glanfield.

"That he will send the Signor Sarini to us. He evidently does not understand your question."

Another moment and Sarini appeared, and with a polite bow requested to know what he could do for the ladies; and, upon Mrs. Fullerton acquainting him with their desires, at once motioned them towards the hut.

"Yes, that will do," exclaimed Glanfield. "Now, Sir

Jasper, if you will take care of Mrs. Fullerton and Maude, Hammerton and I will try and negociate with the head-bandit."

"Ah, father!" cried Maude, passionately, "and it was upon the testimony of this bandit that you condemned Cyril."

"No," said Sir Jasper, as he sadly shook his head. "There was the evidence of my own eyes to boot. Come, do the best you can for us, Glanfield," and then the baronet turned and somewhat ruefully led the way towards the hut. He was a liberal, free-handed gentleman, and would have laughed at being mulcted in any moderate sum in order to extricate himself from the scrape he had got into, regarding it much as he would have looked at a bad night at cards in his younger days; but, thirty thousand pounds of which he would have to find by far the largest part, for he could look to nobody but Glanfield to help in making up such an unconscionable demand, was no flea-bite. He had already begun to recognise that it would have to be found. He could not permit either his sister or daughter to suffer such detention as this if any money he could raise would restore them to liberty; and he already perceived that, if Patroceni was very suave and polite, he was equally stern and relentless. It was the affability of the cat to the mouse within its claws, the purring of the tiger before its spring.

"Now, Hammerton, the sooner this is settled the better. Signor Sarini, perhaps you wouldn't mind letting the Count know we wish to speak to him."

"Si, signor," replied Sarini, and rapidly disappeared into the further tent.

"Now, Hammerton, I don't want to be unpleasant," said Glanfield, "but Sir Jasper has placed this business in my hands, and I'm going to play my hand alone. I shall be glad to have your help of course, but we run in different interests. You, as usual, for yourself, I for Sir Jasper and the rest of us."

"You do me injustice," rejoined Hammerton, hotly. "You cannot understand—you cannot know."

"No, I rather wish I did," replied Glanfield, dryly. "I should like dearly to get at the rights of that night at Wrottsley, and find out by what juggling Cyril Wheldrake was made to appear a cardsharper. I have an idea that you could explain the Count's little game if you chose. Ah! here he comes."

Patroceni lounged up to them in his usual courteous manner, for all the world like a country gentleman about to propose the diversion of the day to his guests.

"You did me the honour to send for me, gentlemen. Nothing serious to find fault with in your accommodation, I trust; if it is rude, remember in these mountain solitudes we are some distance from the railway and civilisation."

Glanfield looked at him for a minute, not a little perplexed at the persistent manner in which Patroceni regarded them as guests and ignored the fact that they were his prisoners.

"Now, Count," he said at last, "let's proceed to business. It's waste of time haggling about the price when you really mean dealing, but thirty thousand pounds is rather too stiff."

"It is merely the marriage portion of Captain Hammerton's elected bride; and can any one suppose he would wish to marry Miss Eversley for anything but herself?"

"Scoundrel! traitor! liar!" exclaimed Hammerton.

"Dangerous words in our relative positions, but no matter. He wanted to marry his cousin, Miss Eversley, or rather her fortune," rejoined Patroceni, quietly. "I *assisted* at that little business at Wrottsley, which crushed his rival, Wheldrake."

The blood rushed to Hammerton's temples; he bit his lips, and, taking a couple of steps towards Patroceni, seemed about to rush upon him, but, quick as thought, Sarini and one or two more brigands intervened, and Hammerton, mastering his passion, remained motionless.

"I demand my per-centage on that fortune," continued the Count with a shrug of his shoulders. "Ah! he has no judgment. He is mad enough to refuse me—Me! Presto! Another shuffle of the cards, and now I take the whole pool."

"Liar!" thundered Hammerton, furiously.

"Stop, sir!" said Patroceni, fiercely; "don't go too far. I warn you. I have sent in *tongues* as well as *fingers* to testify to the urgency of prompt payment of a ransom ere now. As I said before, I shall take the whole pool."

"Please hold your tongue, Hammerton; I should in your case pretty closely, if I set any value on it. It is only children who quarrel over matters of business. When a man is master of the situation what is the good of saying he became so unfairly? No use objecting when you can't sustain it."

"You are a man of business, signor," rejoined Patroceni, politely. "It is quite a pleasure to deal with you."

"It is no use, Count, *killing* the goose with the golden eggs," rejoined Glanfield, significantly.

"The sum named is absurd," interposed Hammerton, with blustering vehemence. "I'd never submit to such infamous extortion."

"Oh, hang it! I say," exclaimed Glanfield, "you have bolted clean out of the course. The extortion don't concern you much—you are not going to find the money."

"No, Captain," rejoined Patroceni, contemptuously, "I should have hardly deemed you worth the trapping."

"Thirty thousand pounds, Count," continued Glanfield, "is an enormous ransom."

"There is risk in meddling with you English," rejoined Patroceni. "I always calculate whether the game is worth the candle. Thanks to him"—and here he pointed scornfully at Hammerton—"I know it is, and that is the price I put upon you."

"And if we say no, what then?" inquired Glanfield.

"It will be uncomfortable for you all," replied Patroceni; "very uncomfortable for some of you. My wolves don't like waiting for their share of the plunder."

"And supposing we consent?" said Mr. Glanfield, quietly.

"It is very simple," replied the Count. "One of you will go back to Naples to get the money—settle whom among yourselves; on his return with it you will be free; but if my spies or scouts give notice of treachery there will be a short shrift for the rest of you."

"I understand," replied Glanfield. "You will let us talk this over amongst ourselves?"

"Certainly, signor," replied the Count. "Tell Sarini there to let me know when you have come to a decision."

And with these words Patroceni strolled leisurely off in the direction of his own tent.

"Now the question lies in a nutshell," said Glanfield. "We've got to find thirty thousand pounds; that means Sir Jasper has mainly, for I can't do a great deal towards it, and you, I presume, less."

"No, I don't think the Count would fancy my I O U's," sneered Hammerton.

"Well, they're not popular, as a rule," rejoined Glanfield.

"Sir, do you mean to insinuate?"

"Of course not. I only mention facts. There's a prejudice generally about that sort of security."

"My bills, Mr. Glanfield, are, I have no doubt, as freely accepted as your own."

"I daresay; but what is the use of arguing about an obsolete coinage not in circulation here? Sir Jasper pays; now, who's to go? How are we to settle that?"

"Leave it to Patroceni," rejoined Hammerton, curtly.

"Good. Here, signor, let the Count know we wish to speak with him."

"Si, signor," replied Sarini, who, in consequence of his knowledge of English, had been told off as personal attendant on the prisoners.

"We shall not be allowed much time to negociate matters," remarked Hammerton, musingly.

Patroceni now issued from the far tent in accordance with Sarini's summons; and, walking across towards them, seated himself on a fallen tree, and smoked on in silence.

"We must do the best we can to accede to your terms, Count," said Glanfield, after a short pause; "but it is, of course, necessary that one of us should return to Naples to make arrangements."

"Quite so," replied the Count. "To Sir Jasper, as the moneyed man in the firm, I shall still offer hospitality."

"I presume so; you shall also settle which of us goes to Naples."

"It is settled," replied Patroceni, laconically.

"Settled already!" interposed Hammerton, sharply. "I thought we were to make our own arrangements?"

"Well, not quite," rejoined Patroceni. "Ah, stop! Another idea—chance, chance shall decide."

"This is no time for jesting, Count," said Hammerton, savagely.

"No, especially as far as *you* are concerned. I think you had better draw lots."

"Yes, that's as good a way of deciding it as any," said Glanfield.

"Hah! and now I think of it,"—as if the idea had just struck him,—"the game will be much more interesting with three players. Don't disturb yourselves, gentlemen. I have here an old play-companion of yours, who will enjoy another game with you both. You shall all draw straws. The man with the longest straw is out, the others to draw again. He with the longest straw is again out. The third goes, and carries all your lives in his hand. Excuse me one moment, I will fetch this countryman of yours, now so fortunately staying with me."

"Who can this stranger be whom he has picked up?" said Hammerton, impatiently. "You and I tossing up who

is to go is all as it should be, but what the deuce has a stranger got to do with our affairs ? "

"Our affairs ! " rejoined Glanfield, with a contemptuous glance at his companion. "I should call it Sir Jasper's affair. However, it strikes me we are pretty much in the hands of Count Patroceni to dispose of us as he will. I have no doubt he means what he says ; but remember one thing— if you try any of your juggling this time you will probably cost us all our lives."

At this moment Patroceni reappeared from the tent, followed by Wheldrake.

"Good heavens ! Cyril ——"

"Wheldrake, by all that's damnable ! " cried Hammerton. "What cursed chance brought him here ? "

"Ah ! gentlemen," said Patroceni, "there was some little difference amongst you, I think, the last time you met ; but if I recollect right Mr. Wheldrake had a presentiment that you would meet again and play for rather higher stakes than you were playing that evening ; and, if I remember right, Captain Hammerton, Wheldrake pointed out to you that it would be his turn to win. It looks rather as if this forecast of his is about to be accomplished. You three, Mr. Wheldrake, are about to draw lots as to which of you will proceed to Naples to raise the ransom I have placed upon your party ; and, gentlemen, I say emphatically, pray bear in mind that, should that negociation fall through, it will be very unfortunate for the men who are left behind."

Hammerton's face blanched ; superstitious, like all gamblers, he felt too sure that he would be the loser this time. Wheldrake's last words again rang in his ears : "We shall play once again, our lives the stakes, and it will be my turn to win." He glanced at his antagonist, for already he had put Glanfield on one side as having no part in the game. It was a duel between him and Wheldrake ; and, as he glanced at Cyril's set face and glittering eyes, his heart sank with a foreboding that Wheldrake's words would prove true. Patro-

ceni, too, was the arbiter of this lottery, and the Count was little likely to favour him after what had passed between them. On the whole, Hammerton could not divest himself of the idea that he would not be allowed fair play, besides having to face his antagonists' luck.

CHAPTER XXI.

"OUR LIVES THE STAKE."

It was a striking scene: the sun still topped the trees, and there in the centre of the plateau, around the fallen tree, stood these three players at this game for life and death, which was about to begin. At a few paces distant were grouped the majority of the brigands, curious to see who might be the lucky scapegoat; lucky in this instance, inasmuch as he did not carry the sins of the people, but only the price at which they were appraised, leaving them to expiate their own iniquities, until he brought back the pence of absolution.

Patroceni, with his back turned towards them, was engaged in receiving from Sarini some half-score wheaten straws, from which he proceeded to carefully select three. Turning round, he held these three straws, of various lengths, high in the air.

"The game is about to begin, gentlemen," he exclaimed, in clear, ringing tones, so that his followers could hear what he said. "The man drawing the longest straw retires, the two others fight the battle out, and he who holds the shortest goes to Naples and is in safety: for the others, it will depend if their friends value their society as highly as I do—I who would see them *die* sooner than be deprived of it."

A low murmur of applause followed Patroceni's cynical speech, which was couched in Italian for the benefit of his comrades. As for the chief actors in the drama about to be

enacted, Glanfield looked on with calm curiosity, but between the other two passed glances of hatred—bitter and unforgiving.

"Now, gentlemen," said Patroceni, as he lifted the sombrero and placed it over his right hand, "the play is about to commence." For a few seconds his two hands were busy beneath his hat, then the sombrero fell to the ground, and discovered his right hand almost enveloped in a gaily-coloured silk handkerchief; the extreme top only—that is, the part between the forefinger and thumb—alone was visible, and from that peeped the heads of three straws.

"May I trouble you to draw, gentlemen? Signor Wheldrake, as the guest who has been longest with me, I will ask you to draw first."

"With pleasure, Count," rejoined Wheldrake, fiercely; "the game is already a foregone conclusion—it is either Glanfield or myself: as for that hound"—pointing to Hammerton—"if there's any shooting to be done you will find him still with you. Captain Hammerton, would you like one more bet before we begin? I will lay you ten sovereigns that I give you a loser, and I name yourself. Ha! ha! you won't bet!" he exclaimed, with a burst of derisive laughter, as Hammerton made no response. "He has plenty of pluck at play when he can tamper with the cards at will, but when it comes to playing for his life, and all chicanery is beyond his reach, he blanches like the cur he is. Look at him, Glanfield!"

Hammerton, indeed, was pale as death; his eyes gleamed with mingled hate, rage, and terror, like those of a trapped animal; but this last taunt roused him, and it was with something of his old savage temper when excited that he hissed out—

"Liar! the game as yet is not played out between us."

"No," sneered Wheldrake. "Ties as yet, but here goes for the trick!" and, as he spoke, he stepped up to the Count, and lightly twitched a straw from between his fingers.

"Captain Hammerton," said the Count, "as my *old friend*,"—and it is impossible to describe the sarcastic inflexion upon these last words—"may I trouble you to draw next?"

Hammerton took one of the remaining straws, and then, stepping back, gave place to Glanfield, who, without waiting to be called, stepped forward, and quietly took the remaining straw from Patroceni's hand.

"Bring up your straws, gentlemen, to be measured;" and as he spoke, he took the straw back from Glanfield's hand. Wheldrake and Hammerton hastened to return their straws also, and in a moment the Count declared that Glanfield had drawn the longest straw, and was consequently out of it.

"Now, gentlemen," continued Patroceni, as he once more arranged the straws under his sombrero, "we will—ah! what do you call it?"

"Run the deciding heat," rejoined Glanfield, promptly.

"Will you once more oblige me?" said the Count, courteously.

Wheldrake, as before, stepped forward, and carelessly twitched a straw from Patroceni's hand, leaving Hammerton the other. Another instant the Count, having stretched forth his hand to receive Wheldrake's straw back, compared the two, and adjudged Wheldrake the winner.

"Mr. Wheldrake, gentlemen, is your ambassador to Naples. The rest of you will honour me with your company a little longer. Mr. Wheldrake, you will start about an hour before day-break. Sarini will make every preparation for your journey, and be your guide as far as you require one. I recommend you to go to rest as soon as you have had your dinner. You know as well as I do you have a couple of hard days' travel before you, and you are on business, signor, that brooks not delay. For the rest of you, gentlemen, your wants shall be attended to as far as means permit. Once more I say adieu; and to you, perhaps, Mr. Wheldrake, good-bye. Still, remember this business once

adjusted, you are free of the mountains for life, and will find the 'safe conduct' of Patroceni more powerful than a troop of gendarmes."

"My dear Cyril, I am delighted to meet you again, and we will all gladly trust you to arrange for our extrication from our present unpleasant position. I was afraid it was to be left to that specious scoundrel and hypocrite, whom, from what I now know, I should be loth to trust with my dog's life, much less my own."

"You will answer for such words as those, Mr. Glanfield," said Hammerton, his face pale with passion.

"I will repeat them, and stand to them at every club in London, if you will. We know now why your ruin was plotted, Cyril."

"And I think I can tell you how it was done."

"If you are going to believe all the tales that arch-scoundrel Patroceni tells you ——" exclaimed Hammerton, in a voice hoarse with passion.

"Your intimate friend, remember," interposed Glanfield, sarcastically, "whom we know now to be a robber, a villain."

"But a man, Captain Hammerton," interrupted Wheldrake. "He may threaten our lives, but he does not stab characters in the dark."

"You will both account to me when we regain our freedom," snarled Hammerton; "but remember it was Count Patroceni discovered and denounced your foul play at Wrottsley, not me, Mr. Wheldrake."

"I have my own idea about that," said Glanfield. "Men like the Count sell their swords or their talents wherever they are well paid for it. He has told us the price he demanded for his services. You refused it! You thought him your tool, and you have found him your master. We may get safe out of his clutches, but I wouldn't take fifty to one about you. Come along, Wheldrake, I want a short

chat with you before you are 'racked up for the night,'"—and the two men strolled away towards Wheldrake's tent.

Hammerton seated himself on the fallen tree, and muttered execrations upon his ill-luck, which had been better bestowed on his evil doings. Then he began to consider the desperate position in which he stood. These two men had cast him out from amongst them like a pariah. Just as society had cast out Wheldrake, so would society cast out him when he, Wheldrake, should reappear amongst them and tell the story of that night's play at Wrottsley, with which it was evident he had been made acquainted. Supported by a man like Glanfield the charge would be too big for him to face; moreover there was his confederate, who might always be induced to confess. He had bought him, but the fellow knew his power, and had more than once since come down for sums in excess of the stipulated price of his assistance; indeed only just before he left England Hammerton received an urgent appeal for another twenty pounds. The request was couched respectfully, but Hammerton knew only too surely that it was but the forerunner of a threatening communication. Hammerton knew human nature too well to doubt that. He bitterly repented his folly; he was quite aware that to pay your confederate in crime and think you have done with him is a mistake no man of the world can be pardoned for falling into. He knew very well that, unless you have the rope, or pretty near its equivalent, round the neck of the man you have suborned, he first becomes a suppliant for alms, then the mendicant grows audacious; finally he threatens, and the end is "chantage," or "black mail" as we call it in England. He had disregarded this man's letter because he was leaving the country. Abroad he would be beyond the reach of his menaces; and were he, Hammerton, only safely married to his cousin, he could afford to laugh at his threats. Now all was changed. To marry Maude would be sheer madness

now that her fortune was gone, or as good as gone. To face England again would be difficult. Still a wealthy marriage was the one chance he had of repairing his shattered fortunes, and where was handsome Fred Hammerton to accomplish that save in England? He was in a deuce of a scrape no doubt. Sir Jasper and the ladies of course had not as yet heard Patroceni's allegation against him, but it wasn't likely that Glanfield would leave them much longer in ignorance on that point. It would simplify things amazingly if Patroceni should take it into his head to shoot both Glanfield and Wheldrake; but bah! what was the use of speculation of this kind? Wheldrake was to go to Naples to arrange about the ransom that night, and Glanfield—ah! what did that fellow mean by saying that they might escape? but that he wouldn't take fifty to one about *his*—Hammerton's—chance? Was his *life* absolutely in danger? His honour was gone already, his money had left him long ago; his last throw for wealth had fallen deuce-ace on the board! Was his life to go too? He had as much courage as the generality of men, but he clung to life. Many men who had lost honour, fortune, and bride, would have deemed it but little worth keeping. Men in Hammerton's position—aye, in half his position—have died by their own hand many a time and oft! To some of these unfortunates the idea of loss of honour has been unendurable, to others loss of wealth has been a bitterness they shrank from facing, but Hammerton's fine feelings had been long ago blunted. He argued that he was too young to die, that his career was so far from ended there was plenty of time to recover himself; and then, he thought, how did he really stand with Patroceni? He had scouted the Count's proposition in London, had thrown hard words at him since he had been his prisoner. It was foolish of him! Stupid to lose his temper in this wise! You can hardly indulge in the luxury of abusing a man who holds your life at his disposal. Ah! why had he not kept his temper? Would

Patroceni revenge himself for these insults? Would he forgive him for having refused to accede to his proposal of percentage on Maude's fortune? What was he to do? How was he to make peace with his dear friend of former days? And here Hammerton fell into a brown study; for, schemer and plotter as he was, he saw no solution of this problem.

Jackson had accompanied his master and the ladies into the hut to assist in unstrapping the baggage, &c., and at once displayed the utter helplessness that might be expected from the confidential old family butler under such circumstances.

"Nonsense, Jackson," said Sir Jasper, in answer to some querulous complaint of the former's, "we shall do very well here. You don't expect to find the accommodation of Wrottsley in the mountains, do you?"

"Why, Sir Jasper! that there Count bragged of his country-seat 'owdacious' when he was there. I heard him myself at your own table; and to think I was pouring out our best champagne for a throat-splitting scoundrel whose trade is robbing and whose country-seat's a hovel like this! I wish I was safe in the dog-kennel at Wrottsley this minute; it'd be a blessed change. Do you think, Sir Jasper, we'll be murdered in our sleep to-night?"

"I think, if the Count hears you call him a throat-splitting scoundrel, he'll be tempted to make your words come true. You'd better curb your tongue if you value your life. Clara," he continued, "can you manage in there."

"Oh, yes," replied Mrs. Fullerton. "If it was only the accommodation I should think nothing of it, but our situation is very serious. There can be no doubt that our lives are at stake if we fail to find this money."

"Don't fret, Clara; don't get frightened. The scrape is serious enough, Heaven knows. We must find the money and part with it, but I believe our lives to be safe."

Patroceni, in a rough way, had made evident preparation

for his prisoners, or *guests*, as he would have termed them. The hut consisted of two rooms; the inner had been fitted up with a couple of beds, a rude toilet-table with looking-glass, two washing-stands, &c., and was meant for the accommodation of the ladies. The outer had a low pallet-bed in one corner, a good sized table in the middle, and some half-dozen chairs and stools; this was to be their living-room. The Count in fact had fitted up his own hut to the best of his ability for his visitors.

Jackson in the meantime continued to potter over his master's dressing-bag in a most disturbed state of mind. Two things harrowed his soul: would his life be spared? and where was his bed-room? If that pallet-bed was destined for Sir Jasper, Jackson feared the accommodation for the servants, even the upper servants, must be mean—terribly mean.

CHAPTER XXII.

HAMMERTON MAKES THE BEST OF THINGS.

The afternoon shades were beginning to fall across the plateau. A slight breeze sighed through the surrounding trees, barely rustling their leaves. It was the end of the siesta hour, but as yet the camp seemed locked in slumber. The brigands were sleeping on the edge of the woods, the others within the hut or tents. One figure alone was to be seen on the strip of grass table-land. Seated on the fallen tree which laid very near the centre of the plateau was Hammerton, still immersed in reverie. He had sat there, changing his position but little, for over an hour. No: look at it which way he would, he could see nothing but ruin for himself accruing out of the accursed mischance that had thrown them into Patroceni's hands. His life undoubtedly was in danger, whatever might be the case with the others.

Glanfield was right about that; but was it not possible to avoid social ruin should he have the good fortune to be rescued with the rest? Wheldrake no doubt must bear a bitter grudge against him, but he could not assist the rest of the party without assisting him. He did not place much reliance on the Count's forbearance; but, let them tell what story they would about him, he felt sure that Sir Jasper would never consent to his life being sacrificed: his uncle was too true and loyal a gentleman for that. If Glanfield and Patroceni did succeed in convincing Sir Jasper of his, Hammerton's, treachery at Wrottsley, well, then, the worst that could happen to him would be to be discarded by his uncle, and to find the doors of Wrottsley closed to him in the future. True there was the social excommunication with which Glanfield had threatened him, but after all Glanfield and Wheldrake knew nothing but what Patroceni had told them—it was the word of an avowed brigand against his. Popular Fred Hammerton could surely hold his own against this specious adventurer, who had imposed upon him in the first instance, and then, throwing off all disguise, appeared in his true colours, and ruthlessly plundered his victim and the friends that victim had introduced him to. No; Hammerton thought it was quite possible to pose as the interesting martyr and obtain much sympathy from society.

True there was one blot in his game: that dissatisfied confederate of his had to be reckoned with, and was likely to be either an expensive incubus or prove the quicksands of his career, and then he bethought him that there was a good deal in having the first word. Neither Maude nor his uncle had heard this ugly story of Patroceni's. He would see Maude and give her his version of the affair before Glanfield had the opportunity of poisoning her mind against him. Chance favoured him, for at this moment Jackson issued from the hut, mopping his brows and exhibiting every sign of a man who has done a hard day's work. He had unpacked

his master's travelling-bag, and now came out to seek some place in which to repose after his labours. Some three or four of the brigands now emerged from the shade of the wood, stretched themselves, and immediately betook themselves to smoking with the air of men who had been culpably neglecting their opportunities. It was to one of these that Jackson first addressed himself; and, in a somewhat pompous fashion, mixed with some little trepidation, inquired where he was to be put up, adding, "I am Sir Jasper's major-domo, young man, and it is the custom in England to lodge the upper servants comfortable."

The man stared vaguely at this address, not one word of which he understood; and then called to one of his fellows, who heard Jackson repeat his appeal with the utmost gravity, and then responded with "No Inglese."

"Captain," exclaimed Jackson, almost pathetically, "you can speak their lingo. I'm dead beat for a bit of a sleep; do, in pity's sake, ask 'em where my bed is."

Hammerton put the question, as desired, but the derisive laugh with which it was received boded ill for Jackson's comfort. Then one of the brigands made answer, and, from the sarcastic inflexion of his voice, even Jackson gathered but cold consolation, while Hammerton could not conceal a smile as he listened to the scoundrel's speech.

"What does he say, sir?" asked Jackson, when the brigand had delivered himself.

"My poor Jackson, I am sorry for you," replied Hammerton; "but he says on the mountains 'tis only the chief and women who have huts or tents; the rest of us sleep with the stars for our counterpane and the breeze through the pines for our lullaby, and ask no better. The fat footman will take no hurt by making the sod his couch for a night or two."

Galling as he knew the last remark would be to Jackson, and though he wanted a small service from that worthy, yet Hammerton could not resist translating it. He had not for-

gotten Jackson's officiousness, such he termed it, about the cards at Wrottsley. It is curious the different epithets we apply to the same transaction. Most acts of our lives are like stones with many facets, and may be regarded in many different lights by many different people. Hammerton thought Jackson officious, but I think the generality of men would laud him for strictly fulfilling a duty he owed to his master.

"Do you mean to say, sir, they expect *me* to sleep out in the open, as if I was a blessed hare?" gasped Jackson.

"Yes; I fancy that's what will be your fate to-night."

"That means rheumatism, Captain Hammerton—that's what it means to a man of my time of life. I'd sooner they murdered me right off as killed me by inches with rheumatic fever. If I could get to speak to that Count, as he called himself, surely he'd bear in mind how I kept a-filling his glass up at Wrottsley."

"I can't say," replied Hammerton; "but, from the way he is treating us all round, favours at Wrottsley don't seem to count for much. It's hard—deuced hard—for an old and valued servant like you to have to sleep in the open, but I'm afraid it will be the case, Jackson. I expect to have to do the same myself, though it naturally comes harder on a man of your years than it does upon me."

"That's what I say, sir. Upper servants who are up in years ought to be made comfortable. These foreigners have no idea of propriety."

"Just so, Jackson. It's very sad, but that's about the size of it. But now," continued Hammerton, as he rose from his seat and laid his hand on the old man's arm, "I want you to do something for me. Tell Miss Maude I want to speak to her; but, mind, don't tell her before Sir Jasper. I don't wish to alarm my uncle unnecessarily, and he might think it is something much more serious than it is that I have to say to her."

"I'll do it for you in another minute," said Jackson.

"But it seems I have no more cause to bother about my bedroom than an old cow, but may just flop down anywhere when I feel tired. All right, sir! I'll tell Miss Maude," and Jackson once more disappeared into the hut.

A few minutes more, and Maude Eversley appeared on the plateau and walked quickly across the grass towards the fallen tree near which Hammerton stood.

"What is it, Fred?" she inquired anxiously. "I am afraid you have more bad news to break to me, and yet surely it is impossible to be placed in a more terrible position than we are. What do you think? Will this dreadful bandit, who so imposed upon you and who was actually an honoured guest at Wrottsley, prove such an utter wretch as to take our lives if this enormous sum of money is not forthcoming? Father declares that the Count is very much in earnest about the demand, but surely it can only mean that he will wring all the money he can from us. He can never surely be such a villain as to slay in cold blood those from whom he received nothing but kindness, those with whom a few months back he dined, shot, and jested."

"From my recent knowledge of the man I would say, yes: but sit down, for I have a good deal to say to you," and Hammerton motioned to the fallen tree which plays so prominent a part in this history, being indeed a species of half rostrum, half confessional, lending itself alternately to the haranguing of a small audience or to the interchange of private conversation.

"I met Count Patroceni, as you know, on the Continent. I was told he was a man of good family, but who had been in trouble on account of his political opinions. When we remember the iron rule of the Austrians and the Bourbons one cannot feel that men were guilty of crime who protested both by word and sword against such monstrous tyranny. I, at all events, reckoned that nothing in the record of a man's life, and we became friends. Unless I had had implicit confidence in his truth and honour you can scarce

suppose I should have brought him to Wrottsley. To find him what he is has been as stupendous a surprise to me as to you; but even then I should have thought, after the hospitality he had received, we might have counted on courtesy."

"I think we have received that to the best of his ability, except on the matter of this monstrous ransom," said Maude, trifling with the tassel of her parasol.

"Ah, yes, he has been civil enough to you ladies and Sir Jasper—the man couldn't be otherwise, but with Glanfield and myself it has been different. Indeed I seem to have provoked the utmost malignancy of his nature. He has accused me of the blackest crimes, declares that I combined with him that night at Wrottsley to ruin Cyril Wheldrake. You saw yourself, Maude, what took place. Why, I took Wheldrake's part until I could do so no longer, and had reluctantly to admit the justice of Patroceni's accusation, but I did not know what manner of man the Count was then. I deemed him a gentleman, and had no idea he was the adventurer and robber we have since discovered him to be. Such a charge, brought by one like Patroceni against a man of proved honour like Wheldrake, is absurd; it falls to the ground at once."

"Then you hold Cyril guiltless now?" asked Maude, eagerly.

"Yes. While I thought the Count a gentleman of repute I was reluctantly compelled to believe what he proved. Now I know him for a cardsharper I'd no more believe my eyes than I would if assisting at one of Maskelyne and Cooke's entertainments. Remember, Maude, it was the evidence of his own eyes convinced your father; but, if Houdin had shuffled the cards, he'd have laughed at such evidence. I, as introducing the hawk into the dove-cote, am the cause of all our past and present trouble. I have been cruelly deceived, and am likely to pay dearly for my credulity; but I could not rest, dear Maude, till I had made

this confession to you, and acknowledged that I now believe Wheldrake to have been the victim of a blackleg's *ruse*."

"Oh, bless you for that, Fred!" cried Maude, passionately. "I shall even welcome the loss of all this money if it only clears Cyril's good name. But what do you mean about your being likely to pay dearly for your belief in the Count?"

"I mean this: that I am undoubtedly in greater danger than the rest of you, simply from Patroceni's malevolence. I used strong and foolish language when we were first made prisoners, which I am like to be made to suffer for. If this money or something approaching it is raised nobody is in the slightest danger except myself. This is not only my opinion but that of others. Glanfield, little more than an hour ago, observed, 'We may get safe away, but I wouldn't take fifty to one about your chance.' It was a brutal and ungenerous remark, but I deserved it. My cursed facility of making acquaintances has involved you all in this miserable scrape."

"But, my dear Fred," said Maude, proudly, "you don't suppose your kith and kin are such curs as to save their skin and leave you behind? No," continued the girl with all the impulsiveness of her honest resolute nature, "we'll share the same fate one and all, let it be what it may."

Hammerton's lips twitched slightly. His cousin's pluck was a rebuke to his own, if not cowardice, meanness. There are times when life itself may be bought too dearly; and, though men have cringed to those they have injured in order to obtain this boon at their hands, they do not commend themselves to their fellows. We should have thought more of his Grace of Monmouth if he had not grovelled to his despicable uncle before he dree'd his doom. He died like a man, it is true; but he begged for his life like —— Well, I'll not finish the sentence. We can only say "the pity of it! oh, the pity of it!"

"No, Maude, I know you will all stand by me. Sir Jasper

is the last man to leave his nephew in the lurch, but my sole chance of safety lies, as far as I can see, in your hands."

"In mine! Why, Fred, how on earth can I help you? I most sincerely wish I could."

"You can. Listen to me. Your influence over Cyril Wheldrake exists still. Men who love as he loved do not forget in a few months."

"*I* have influence over Cyril?" she murmured in dreamy tones, and looking into his face with a completely bewildered expression; "doubtful, very. I have never heard of him all these months, which does not look as if he retained much interest in me."

"I happen to know the contrary, and, moreover, he has considerable weight with Patroceni."

"Cyril!" exclaimed the girl, "why, where is he?"

"In this camp, and within a hundred yards of us. No, don't do that!" he exclaimed sharply, as Maude gave signs of becoming hysterical; "we have no time for that sort of nonsense just now. He is apparently a prisoner like ourselves, but there are prisoners and prisoners, and he is upon a very different footing from the rest of us."

"Cyril Wheldrake here!" muttered Maude, gulping down her emotion by a resolute effort. "Shall I see him—do you think?" and the question was put almost submissively.

Quick as thought, Hammerton seized upon the point that had turned up in his favour. He knew that he had merely to let Wheldrake know that Maude desired to see him and double sentries would hardly prevent that interview, while he had ascertained that, unless different arrangements were made at nightfall, it was only on the outskirts of the camp that sentries were placed.

"I think," he said at length, "I could manage that for you by the adroit use of a sovereign or two."

"Oh, if you could, Fred, you can't imagine how I should feel indebted to you," and Maude clasped his arm with her hands in pretty supplication of her request.

"All right! I'll arrange it for you. Mind you come when you're called, and remember you are pledged to entreat his influence in my behalf."

CHAPTER XXIII.

MRS. FULLERTON ON MARRIAGE.

Hammerton thought with no little satisfaction over the way in which he had played his cards, as Maude strolled back to the hut. "Ah," he muttered, "that marriage being out of the question it was as well to retire gracefully from the pursuit. Maude without her thirty thousand pounds is, I regret to say, 'a thing of beauty and a joy for ever,' beyond my indulging in. No. Matrimony with me is a chapter in social economy. My wife must not only be able to pay her way, but mine too. Considering how over-stocked with marriageable young women the United Kingdom is, I think a good-looking fellow of decent family is entitled to ask that much. Now, Maude is delighted to see me back out to begin with. My sweet cousin never quite appreciated me, though I should have married her but for this confounded *contretemps*. Secondly, she is supremely grateful to me for expressing my firm belief in Wheldrake's innocence, and on that point there's no better judge; and, lastly, Wheldrake himself, when he sees all this, will be sure, for his own sake, to do the best for me. There's the one thing—How did Wheldrake come here? Impossible to guess—Patroceni is humorous in his epithets. He calls us guests. Wheldrake, I should imagine, is less a prisoner than any of us, although he was made to draw lots with us. A cynical, whimsical devil—this Patroceni. I wonder how much of my past he's thought fit to entrust Wheldrake with. However, it's useless to speculate on that point—my only chance is to act as if he has told him nothing."

At this juncture Mrs. Fullerton emerged from the hut,

and wended her way across the grass leisurely to where Hammerton was seated. "Yes," he murmured sarcastically; "nothing stops them. Here comes my beloved aunt, rather uncomfortable about her personal safety, and in serious trepidation about her diamonds and bank-account. Sensible people keep it overdrawn, which does away with all anxiety, and yet in the midst of all her troubles here she is armed *cap-à-pied* on the chance of churning up a flirtation with that phlegmatic Glanfield. I fancy most women would have made light of the lions if they could have had a few hours' *tête-à-tête* with Daniel. It's in the blood of most of them, and wonderful are the small deer they will stoop to rather than not subjugate somebody. Here's Aunt Clara, given Glanfield out of the way, quite capable of reducing one of these scoundrels to a lap-dog condition; and I'd back her to do it if she took it into her head to try."

"Well, Fred," said Mrs. Fullerton, anxiously, "what terms have you succeeded in making with your *friend?*" and the widow accentuated the last word spitefully. "Is it all settled?"

"Yes, but the Count would abate not a tittle of the sum he at first named."

"It's monstrous, and if the Neapolitan police were good for anything they would interfere at once."

"It's devoutly to be hoped they won't," replied Hammerton, sharply. "Any interference on their part would cost us our lives in all probability; but I don't think we need be apprehensive on that point."

"I suppose Jasper will have to go to Naples to arrange money matters?"

"No, I think not; but here comes Glanfield; he will tell you all about it better than I can," and Hammerton took the opportunity of Glanfield's approach to make his escape.

"Sit down, Mr. Glanfield, and tell me the result of your negociations. Fred tells me you have failed to obtain any reduction of the monstrous demand.'

"None," rejoined Glanfield, gaily. "The Count is a first-class marauder, and understands the skinning of his victims thoroughly. He'd have been a splendid fellow in the old days, when 'noble Lord Howard he lived on the border,' a very prince of spoilers."

"Upon my word I don't see what you've got to look so pleased about," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton, tartly. "Even if our lives are spared we shall pay very dearly for them."

"My dear Mrs. Fullerton, don't pray be under any anxiety about our safety. A temporary detention is all you have to fear, perhaps prolonged a week more than is agreeable, but that's the worst that can happen to us."

"Well, who is to go? You are sure there is no danger? I know I can rely upon what you say. Why don't they send Jasper?"

"For the best of all possible reasons. The Count is much too 'cute to part with 'the pick of the basket.' Sir Jasper, he knows, is far away the wealthiest of his captives. Patroceni's not the man, when he's made a haul, to throw the big fish back into the stream."

"Then I presume you go, and that is why you are so absurdly cheerful," said Mrs. Fullerton with some little asperity.

Glanfield looked at her for a moment. "A little irritable from change of stable," he muttered. "No," he continued aloud, "I don't go, but Cyril Wheldrake does, and he can ——"

"Mr. Wheldrake!" almost screamed Mrs. Fullerton. "You don't mean to tell me he's here? How did he come? When did he come? Quick! tell me everything."

"It's a long story," replied Glanfield, "but he's a prisoner like ourselves. He was actually kidnapped at Naples in the Villa del Reale, not a quarter of a mile from our hotel. He has been here some days, and says Patroceni had the most accurate information with regard to our movements all along. He has lots of spies in Naples, and any attempt at

false play in this business would very likely result in terrible consequences to the men left behind; but we may thoroughly trust Cyril."

"And how does he look?" asked Mrs. Fullerton.

"Rather worn. He was very anxious to hear all about Maude. He had seen in some stray society paper that she was going to be married to Hammerton, and he wanted much to know whether that was true. I don't know what to think—she puzzles me. Sometimes I think he has a chance, and then she lashes out and shows temper, just as she did the other day at Naples, and it looks odds against her settling down to double harness. What do you think?"

"I think, in the first place, that you get more difficult to understand day by day; but, as a woman whose misfortune it has been to be initiated in the language of grooms and horse-copers, I won't affect not to understand you. As I told you once before, I'm puzzled; but, if Mr. Wheldrake reappears upon the scene, I wouldn't give much for Fred's chance. It's Mr. Wheldrake's absence that makes Fred's opportunity."

"He'll be awful glad to hear that, poor old chap, for he hasn't got over it a bit. He's just as far gone as ever he was. He's exuding spooniness from every pore."

"I'm sorry to hear it," replied Mrs. Fullerton, gravely.

"No good can come of it while that horrid charge hangs over his head. If they meet they'll only make each other unhappy. Sir Jasper will never give his consent."

"My dear Mrs. Fullerton, Cyril will never need it while that charge remains disproved. He said he would ask no girl to share so stained a name as his that night at Wrottsley, and he would, nay does, say the same now; but thank Heaven there's a rift through the clouds at last, and I believe we shall be in possession of the true story of that night's work before long."

"What, you think Mr. Wheldrake will be able to prove his innocence?"

"I do, and to show who was guilty besides. But no more of that at present. How are you put up—pretty comfortably?"

"Oh, very fairly. I've slept in much rougher places when touring in Italy years ago. If you get off the beaten track in this country, as you know, the accommodation for travellers is pretty rough. Maude and I have not much to complain of. Besides, we were sent up an excellent plain meal, with wine that even Sir Jasper admitted to be excellent of its kind."

Mrs. Fullerton, it must be remembered, was talking of twenty years ago, or more even. While she is speaking the great struggle between Austria and Prussia for the supremacy of Germany has yet to be fought; and her reminiscences of travelling in Italy were before the French Emperor's proud boast that Italy should be free from the Alps to the Adriatic had been half realised, on Solferino's blundered field, where masses of the finest cavalry in the world, on ground specially adapted for horsemen, looked coolly on while their brethren of the line were manœuvred to their destruction.

"Oh, well, there's nothing to be very unhappy about, after all. I am sure, if all ends as I think it will, in clearing Wheldrake's honour, we shall have our *quid pro quo* out of it. We shall be bled; but, to secure his daughter's happiness and to right Wheldrake's good name, Sir Jasper would not grudge a few thousand pounds. Moreover, remember—Wheldrake, in some shape, will lighten the burden; for he has money, and is most liberal in his suggestions as to what part he is to take upon himself."

"Mr. Glanfield," exclaimed the widow, with a burst of enthusiasm, "I forgive you all your slang. I think you're one of the best men and staunchest friends I ever met with." And in the fulness of her heart Mrs. Fullerton extended her hand to Glanfield.

It was a plump, warm, pretty hand, and therefore it was

excusable in Mr. Glanfield to be rather reluctant about releasing it; but even Mrs. Fullerton, who was by no means unaccustomed to having it squeezed, flushed slightly at the unconscionable time that gentlemen held it. "Oh dear!" she muttered to herself, "if he wants it for a permanency, why can't he say so? and, my gracious! my poor *patte* might as well be in a lemon-squeezer."

"Thank you, Mr. Glanfield," she said at length, when he relapsed his grasp; "I don't think there's a whole bone left in it. That hearty English grip comes a trifle hard on feminine fingers."

"The old story," he replied, roughly. "The minute we're fools enough to exhibit the least bit of feeling you laugh at us. The old axiom is right—'Never lose your head about a woman, and she is safe to lose her head about you.'"

Mrs. Fullerton opened her eyes to their widest. She had never heard such cynical worldly maxims drop from Glanfield's lips before. The widow had yet to learn that few men of the world but are furnished with such sceptical lore relating to the sex, which they preach theoretically but usually forget in practice. It is the veriest club sceptic—that authority of the smoking-room on the eternal war between the sexes—that usually winds up by falling into the toils of the third-rate actress or milliner's apprentice. Mrs. Fullerton felt more respect for Glanfield after his last remark than she had ever felt before. A woman always admires a man who asserts himself, just as she always reverences the man who is emphatically her master: more clearly emphasised this in low life, where the passions are broader because less restrained by the training of civilisation. The one thing immutable on this earth is human nature, which is ever the same let the varnish be what it may. Cupidity, jealousy, vanity, meanness, and all the rest of the passions, are as much in play on the banks of the Congo as on the banks of the Thames.

"Pardon me, Mr. Glanfield, but there is surely no ques-

tion of either of us losing our heads. You might," added Mrs. Fullerton, demurely, "go wild about a horse, but not about one of our inferior sex."

But Glanfield had already recovered himself. It was very rarely that the imperturbable Jim was drawn into so much warmth of expression; and that he should have so far committed himself was due to the elation of his spirits at meeting Wheldrake and hearing Patroceni's account of the Wrottsley affair, shadowy though it was. Wheldrake had told him all about the night's play with Sarini, and Glanfield quite agreed that the introduction of the false cards amongst Sarini's notes had been planned solely with a view of showing Wheldrake how he had been made to appear guilty of cheating at Wrottsley. One thing Glanfield completely overlooked in his anxiety to arrive at Wheldrake's innocence: it was that the proof of it all depended so far on the word of Patroceni, and that he was, to say the least of it, of very dubious character and antecedents.

"Quite right, Mrs. Fullerton, we do go just as wild about horses as we do about your charming selves; and, upon my honour, I don't know which we come to most grief over. You see a fellow can lose a lot of money over a horse when he takes a fancy to one, but he can lose quite as much when he takes a fancy to a woman, and perhaps wreck his life's happiness to boot. Another advantage: you can always get rid of the one you see, but you can't of the other. The four-footed love comes cheapest in the end."

"Well," exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton, "how you really dare to preach such a homily to me I can't conceive! What little good ever adorns your worthless lives emanates from us. As boys you owe your best teaching to your mother; as men, in nine cases out of ten, you derive your best impulses from your sweethearts and wives."

"Wonder what Jack Boscobel said about that? His wife landed him in the Bankruptcy Court at the end of the second season."

"Mrs. Boscobel was a vain, frivolous woman, whom no sensible man ought to have married," retorted Mrs. Fullerton, sharply. "She is the exception that proves the rule."

"Strikes me," replied Glanfield, "you carry on this argument pretty much as ladies play a round game—you keep on making rules to suit your own hand; however, the deduction is obvious. *Theoretically*, we are all to get married and live happy ever afterwards; *practically*, we don't always manage that latter part."

"It's entirely your own faults when you don't," said Mrs. Fullerton, laughing. "If you give us all we want and let us have our own way there never would be domestic squabbles. But when does Mr. Wheldrake start?"

"A little before daybreak," rejoined Glanfield.

"And when will he return?"

"That is not quite so easy to say. We shall, no doubt, speedily hear from him, but the raising of this amount of money in specie will, I am afraid, cause some little delay. While this superb weather lasts there is no great hardship in this sort of picnicking, and we shall be probably ransomed before there is any change in it."

"One question more," said Mrs. Fullerton, rising. "Does Maude know Mr. Wheldrake is here?"

"I can't say," replied Glanfield.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHISEL ON THE TRAIL.

We must now look back upon the troubles of a gentleman who has so far played a very inferior part of this narrative. Mr. Chisel, after some months' weary waiting, had one morning received the welcome order to join his master in Italy, for that country had been the scene of Wheldrake's

wanderings. Rome, Florence, Venice, Pisa, Milan, &c., he had sojourned in every one of them; sauntering, so to speak, backwards and forwards through the country as fancy led him without any set line of travel. Wherever he might be, however, Wheldrake scrupulously avoided his countrymen and the hotels and quarters of the towns most affected by them; and so successful had he been in maintaining his exclusiveness that he had encountered none of his acquaintances to speak to, supposing their virtue did not suggest to them that, after the manner of the Levite, they should pass by on the other side. So sensitive was Wheldrake on this point, that, on the few occasions he had either seen or learnt there were old friends of his in a place, he had carefully avoided them and at once cut short his stay.

After various wanderings he at last found himself in Naples, and at once started off to see the marvels of Pompeii. This curious reproduction of the old Roman life had a fascination for him, and he moved at once from Naples to the little inn at Pompeii, and spent days in exploring the unburied cities. Satiated at last by this study of the luxurious life of the Roman empire, he one day set forth on foot to Naples, leaving Chisel to follow by carriage with the luggage, with what disastrous result we have seen. When Chisel arrived with the baggage and found that his master had never reached the hotel he had specified, Chisel was by no means put out. He was used to this. In his desire to avoid recognition, his master often reconnoitred the hotels before bringing his baggage, in order to be sure there was no gushing, garrulous acquaintance of his therein. To be patronisingly pitied for misfortune is perhaps the most galling ordeal humanity is ever called on to encounter. So Chisel patiently awaited either his master's appearance or orders from him of some sort; but the night rolled by and the next day followed suit, and still Mr. Chisel heard nothing of his master, and then it came upon him that he must be up and doing. He was quite conscious that if any-

thing had happened to his master he'd a difficult task before him. He was a sharp fellow, but he had no knowledge of either Italian or of foreign customs, nor had he any one to whom he could apply for advice. His first step was obvious: to go round the hotels and inquire whether Wheldrake was amongst the guests was soon done, with unsatisfactory result: but Mr. Chisel did obtain one bit of intelligence, namely, that Sir Jasper and his party were in Naples. Chisel turned it over in his mind a good many times as to whether he should take counsel with them; but he knew upon what peculiar grounds his master had left Wrottsley, and surmised that, should Wheldrake turn up all right, these were the people of all others he would least wish to meet. And this feeling restrained him, though, for the matter of that, none of Sir Jasper's party had much experience of the customs of the country. Then Mr. Chisel got hold of an interpreter, who accompanied him to the police, where he told his story, was cross-examined as closely as if he himself might be supposed to have made away with his master, his answers being carefully taken down in a folio volume, at great length. Then the police gave him to understand that they would see about it; and left a pleasant impression that if he thought to throw dust in their eyes, and evade the consequence of his crime in that wise, he was very much mistaken. Chisel had now to discover that the Neapolitan police had a leisurely way of seeing about things that was simply maddening, and that his calling to ask if they had any information to give him only furnished occasion for a fresh examination of himself. In short, the police had got it into their sapient heads that Chisel had murdered his master, and was adopting the stale device of raising a hue and cry to divert suspicion from himself. Instead of making strenuous search after the missing man they directed their whole energies to dogging the steps of his servant. They had never been much use at the best of times, save to carry out the behests of that abominable tyrant, King Bomba, the last reigning monarch

in Europe who dared to venture upon atrocities that would have driven the very Ashantees into insurrection. In these days they took things pretty easily, unless their palms were well oiled. While King Bomba reigned it had been different, for that kinglet was possessed of a royally irascible temper, that badly brooked disappointment. If his agents failed to apprehend the unfortunate who had incurred the royal wrath, he had a way of meting out the death or imprisonment designed for the object of his detestation on the agent who had failed to apprehend him. The Neapolitan police, under these circumstances, became an extremely acute body whenever royalty named the quarry. But it was not likely they were going to trouble their heads much about an obscure Englishman, in whose fate it was quite evident no one took an interest save his servant; and about that, as aforesaid, the police had formed their own opinions—it was not likely that this fat-headed islander was going to impose upon the superior intelligence of a Latin race! It was always the same; such men always over-acted their part. In the extreme fuss he was making about his master's disappearance, he was sure, sooner or later, to expose how he himself had caused that disappearance. So Chisel was the daily victim of this delusion. He called to inquire for news, and was quietly put through a most insidious cross-examination by one of the smartest chiefs of the gendarmerie.

Chisel at last got wearied and disgusted with the eternal response that they had nothing as yet to communicate, but they were on the track. He determined to consult Mr. Glanfield; he was a staunch friend of his master's, and he could count upon help from him. These cursed gendarmes would pay more attention to him than they did to a man of his own station.

They would never dare to question Mr. Glanfield in the way they did him. And now occurred another surprise for Mr. Chisel. He had, as we know, been a good while before he could make up his mind to appeal to Sir Jasper's party

for assistance in this matter; and when he arrived at their hotel and asked to see Mr. Glanfield he was informed the whole party had departed for Amalfi that morning, and would not be back for two, or it might be for three, days. Mr. Chisel waited two days, and then once more called at the hotel, only to be informed that the travellers had not as yet returned. He called again the next day, but the reply was the same. It was curious. He applied to see the landlord. What did the landlord think? Did he fancy anything was wrong with the travellers? But the landlord merely shrugged his shoulders and laughed. The English milord had kept on his rooms, quite conclusive this to the hotel-keeper that no harm could have come to him.

"Ah! your countrymen are not like other people," said he. "They are as if they were bitten by the tarantula; they have no idea of the *dolce far niente*—they are always on the move. They don't understand the siesta. Ah! who can say where an Englishman's wanderings will end? They may not come back for a week, but they have left all their heavy baggage, and they have kept on my rooms. Milord Verslée, he is very rich and a great signor in his own country?"

"Yes," retorted Chisel, "but that's no safeguard against a man coming to grief. It's a queer road that to Amalfi, so I hear; and, though they say such things don't take place now, yet I'm told that there are a good many of your people who were 'out' in the troublous times who have taken to the mountains."

"The saints forbid, signor!" replied the landlord, crossing himself. "It is best not to talk of such people—they have both long ears and long arms; but, even supposing there should be some of them about, they would never meddle with Englishmen, much less so large a party as Milord Verslée's. Ah!" he continued, looking round cautiously and lowering his voice, "they are a great pest to the country, and interfere dreadfully with our business."

"I dare say," replied Chisel, quietly; "I'll call in to-morrow. Interfere with his business!" he muttered to himself, "no doubt they do. That sleek old villain yearns for a monopoly, and feels quite equal to doing all the robbery in these parts."

Another day or two elapsed, and still Chisel could hear nothing of either his master or Sir Jasper's party. A shrewd, sharp, energetic man, sincerely attached to his master, he chafed terribly under this enforced inaction. Suddenly an idea struck him: he was no good here, he could hit upon no clue which afforded a possibility of tracing his master. As for the police, if they acted at all they would act in their own way and at their own time. He would follow Sir Jasper to Amalfi. The carriages had been taken from the hotel, and would be therefore easily traced along the road. By that means he would either find Sir Jasper and his party or discover what had become of them. An excellent plan, but with one very serious drawback, which it was impossible that Chisel could conjecture. It was simply this: Chisel is bent on tracking Sir Jasper, whilst, unknown to him, the police are dogging his own steps. Should Chisel be successful in his search the trail must inevitably lead him into the midst of Patroceni's band with the gendarmes on his track, and this is likely to render the position of the captives extremely hazardous.

However, all this was of course outside the ken of Chisel. That faithful servitor made speedy arrangements for hiring a hack, and with a light valise strapped at the back of his saddle started forth on the road to Amalfi. Inquiries at Pompeii of course speedily elicited the fact that Sir Jasper's party had passed through three days before on the way to Amalfi.

"Yes," said the hostess, "we expected them back the day before yesterday; but of course ladies and gentlemen on their pleasure do not tie themselves down to time. They probably found the sea-breezes and hill-scenery of Amalfi so

much to their taste that they stayed on there, or perhaps they made excursions from there in some other direction. There was no saying what an Englishman would not do in that way. Why, there was the signor, your master, spent whole days here wandering about these old ruined cities. How could people leave Naples with all its life and music to look at these dreary cities of the dead? Ah! if she had only a holiday she wouldn't waste it wandering about these old lava beds!" So Chisel, having refreshed himself, and finding there was no more information to be gathered from his hostess, once more swung himself into the saddle and resumed his journey. It was often done, but it was a very long stage to pull through to Amalfi in one day. Chisel, who was versatile in his accomplishments, was a fair horseman, and consequently proceeded leisurely on his way, so as to save his horse as much as possible.

He had ascertained that Sir Jasper and his party had passed, but nothing had been seen of them since, although they had spoken of their intention of stopping for some hours, if not for the night, at the little inn on their return. Nothing much was to be made of this information, and Chisel pushed on in the direction of Amalfi. He had not gone far before he perceived two carriages coming towards him. Now carriages are scarce on that road, and it struck Chisel as rather singular that there should be two evidently travelling in company, and as they drew near he noticed that they were both empty. Then it struck him that these were probably the carriages that had conveyed Sir Jasper and his party, and the drivers would be able at all events to tell him where they had left their employers. But this was precisely what they could not or would not do; they either did not or pretended not to understand the questions put to them; and Chisel was about to abandon his inquiries in despair when another horseman came up, and put a very different complexion on the affair.

Time is apparently of no consequence in Naples and its

vicinity. The passers-by have always leisure to participate in the business of the stranger. The bare idea of anybody having any business and endeavouring to attend to it perhaps stimulates their indolent nature, but certain it is that the new-comer joined in the questioning of the drivers with the readiest good-nature. He spoke a little English, and his appearance evidently disconcerted the drivers. He spoke as a man having authority, and, though Chisel did not understand what he said, he could see that he was listened to with great deference.

"Ah," he said, "you are the drivers who took the English lord off to Amalfi? Not a bit of use your denying it, because I know you both, and saw you start. This gentleman is desirous of knowing where you left those ladies and gentlemen. Well, that is a question very easy to answer; you have only to say and then he would be satisfied."

But this apparently was not so easy. The drivers stammered, and when pressed gave most evasive and equivocal answers; but this only whetted the curiosity of the police-agent, for such he was. Had the drivers lied glibly, the police-agent would have troubled his head no further about the matter. His object was never to let Chisel out of his sight. Holding the theory that the luckless Chisel had done his master to death, he persistently tracked him, in order to obtain evidence of his crime, but the minute these drivers made a mystery of where they had left their employers he was determined to know. A mystery to him was what a double acrostic is to some people; he delighted in mysteries. His life was spent in elucidating them; his manner suddenly changed. Instead of the genial *bonhomie* with which he first commenced his inquiries, he assumed a more minatory tone, and said sharply, "No nonsense! You know perfectly well who I am; answer me directly. What have you done with the English people you drove from Naples?"

The faces of the unfortunate drivers were a study. Con-

sternation was depicted on their countenances. On the one side stood the vengeance of the brigands, on the other the retribution which followed any trifling with the police. M. Leroux was a Frenchman, and regarded as one of the most astute and determined police-agents whom the Government had in their employ; but after a little hesitation the drivers remembered that they were coming away from brigands, whilst they were going straight into the jaws of the police; and, therefore, no little to Leroux's astonishment, made a full confession of what had befallen Sir Jasper and his party.

"I can now tell you what you want to know, signor," said the police-agent. "The English milord and his party have fallen into the hands of brigands. It is perfectly useless for you to endeavour to trace them, and, between you and me, this road is by no means safe to travel further. I know the habits of these gentry, and it is in Naples we shall next hear tidings of them."

Chisel pondered for a few seconds over the stranger's remarks, and then followed his advice and turned his horse about.

CHAPTER XXV.

REAPPEARANCE OF GIOVANNI.

A RUEFUL sight was Jackson pacing the platform in a despair half comic, half pathetic. The sun had just sunk below the trees, and that pompous servitor was feebly wondering where he was to lay his head.

"Thomas Jackson," he murmured to himself, "you're a man as has always done your duty by your employers. No one can ever say as the Wrottsleys' wine wasn't properly butlered. No one can say as the Wrottsley plate wasn't properly cleaned; and as for the lamps, and boots, and

shoes, no one can say as Thomas Jackson didn't see that the juniors did their duty by them; but such a position for an upper servant to be placed in I never did see. Bed! the savages don't seem to know what such a thing is. Hot water! well, they don't trouble that much, either hot or cold, either inside or out. And drink!—no butler that ever lived could fill glasses fast enough for such a set of sponges as these. It seems to me there is a sort of game of cross-purposes going on; what with all this confidential talk at a time the fat'll be in the fire, and the last of the Jacksons become the tenant of a grave amongst wild beasts in a foreign land. Pretty thing this to happen to a man who's made his responses regular in Wrottsley church for the last thirty years. No tombstone to mark the spot for inquiring friends and record my virtues. I should like to have had it writ up that his claret was always warm, and his champagne cold; but I suppose that's not quite the thing for an elegy. Mercy on me, who's this?"

Jackson's steps by this time had carried him to the edge of the wood, and from the wood slowly emerged a man with livid face and eyes that still burnt with the but half-subdued light of fever. His head was swathed in bandages, and he bore the appearance of one who had gazed far through the portals of the tomb. He looked about him in a sort of timid, unnerved way, as if in search of some one, and had not proceeded far before he was hailed by one of the brigands who was idly smoking on the grass.

"Ah, Giovanni!—what! you are about again? It's not many who recover from his Excellency's handwriting. Your headpiece must be stronger built than those of most of us to have stood such a blow as I saw dealt you. Santo Diavolo! it would have killed an ox!"

"I have been as near death as a man can go and live. My brain racks yet," replied Giovanni, in a low quivering voice. "My knees shake, and I don't think I shall ever be a man again," and as he spoke the broken-down bandit sank on the

turf beside his comrade. "And Matteo," he exclaimed, while a savage gleam shot from his dark eyes, "I suppose he has been handsomely rewarded? Is he still here?"

Pietro, for he happened to be the man Giovanni had addressed, eyed him narrowly for some seconds before he answered.

"You had best be careful what you do in that matter—I can see revenge in your face; but mind, I have no fancy any more than the rest of us to find our lives in jeopardy in order that you may pay off a grudge against Matteo."

"No, no," interposed the other nervously. "I'll be true to my oath, never fear; but that, Pietro, doesn't forbid that I should settle my quarrel with Matteo in my own way. *That's* not against mountain law."

"I'm not sure," replied the other. "You can never keep the wine-cup from your lips, and when you get drunk on service your tongue runs riot and you endanger the whole of us. Matteo was right to let the chief know."

"It was a dog's trick," retorted Giovanni, sullenly. "There was no harm done, and he might have spared an old comrade. That I'm not beneath the turf is no thanks to him; and do you think I'll leave a debt like this unpaid?"

"If you're guided by me you will. If you endanger the rest of us, remember there will be a score and more daggers at your throat. Moreover, I should doubt whether his Excellency doesn't value Matteo's brains higher than your brute strength."

"Ha! I am not to strike back," replied Giovanni, in tones which, though low, were pregnant with concentrated hate. "You say right, Pietro, it is strength against brains. Matteo has reft me of my strength; let him take heed that I, in my turn, don't still his scheming brain for ever."

Once more Pietro looked at him curiously.

"Yes, you are dangerous," he said. "If I were Matteo I should deem it a misfortune that his Excellency did not

strike a trifle harder; but remember, if you involve the common safety I will kill you with my own hand."

"A fortnight ago," said the once brawny ruffian, as he gazed at his now shrunken limbs, "and the man who talked of killing Giovanni would have felt he had no holiday task before him. Now I could not struggle with a child. Give me a pull at a wine-flask, for Heaven's sake."

"They have kept you short of liquor, no doubt," replied Pietro, with a critical glance at his companion. "It's ill feeding fevers on stuff like this," and as he spoke the bandit rose, and, fishing a flask out of the little stream that trickled along the edge of the plateau on the side where the tents were pitched, proceeded to administer a cup of wine to his invalid companion.

"Drink!" he exclaimed; "it will do you good. It will send the life-blood through your veins once more. The fever has well-nigh left you, and your strength will come back."

The shattered bandit greedily drained the cup that was proffered him.

"That's good stuff," said he, smacking his lips; "the first I've tasted since his Excellency struck me down up yonder. Ha! it puts heart in a man, that. Fill it again."

"I will," replied Pietro; "but, remember, that's the last, and is more than you can carry."

Pietro was right, for no sooner had he drained it than the enfeebled man sank back upon the heather, and dropped off to slumber, like a child. His comrade looked at him for a moment, and then threw a cloak over him, with more tenderness than could be expected from the rough marauder he was.

"There!" he said, "sleep like that means health and strength. He wants the wine now, but not too much—and who shall say what is Giovanni's idea of enough?"

Old Jackson from a little distance had watched the colloquy between the brigands with breathless interest. He had taken it into his addled old head that he was living in an

atmosphere of plot and intrigue, and that the whole party depended upon his alertness and vigilance. He could not understand in the least what the two men were saying; but he could comprehend Giovanni's gleaming eyes and vindictive expression, and drew his own conclusions.

"If I only understood their lingo!" he muttered, mopping his brows; "but still, to a man like me, who's spent his life in studying faces to judge what their owners would *take*, it's all clear as daylight. That scoundrel with the bandages has got an all-round face; he drinks all he comes across, with a preference for something short very frequently. They don't stick at trifles, that sort—specially in the lower orders. A butler has great opportunities. I know your generous port-wine face, and your much calculating sherry-and-seltzer countenance. It's the old story of the babes in the wood over again, and we're the babes. Those two scoundrels were the villains of the fable, and that ruffian in the bandages was advocating the cutting our throats, while the other, I fancy, was for merely emptying our pockets. Now, Thomas Jackson, you just pull yourself together, and think what's best to be done. You've got to pull the whole of 'em through, and it requires a man of gumption to do it, and you're the only one of the lot that's got any gumption. You were the only one who had the presence of mind to call for the police when we were taken. If they didn't come it wasn't your fault."

But the more Jackson puzzled his brain over the problem of escape the more intricate it became. The old man, in fact, indulged in a very Newgate Calendar of bloodshed, and pictured deeds of violence that he was perfectly incapable of committing. He gravely discussed within himself the advisability of knocking the sleeping brigand on the head, the garrulous, tender-hearted old man being as utterly wanting in the nerve requisite for the shedding of blood as a canary. Then Jackson took it into his head that it was his duty to warn his fellow-captives of their danger, and

that they should all prepare to sell their lives dearly, and die like Englishmen. Then he reflected that this would not much better things; that if it was intended to put them to death there could be very little doubt about their captors carrying out their intentions. In fact, the more Jackson thought about it the less he saw what was to be done. One thing was imperative, that it behoved him to keep his eyes open, and watch over the interests of the party.

Giovanni slept as if there had been no whit of exaggeration in his statement that he had been in the very jaws of death. But for the rough though patient nursing of some of his comrades he had never recovered that terrible blow dealt by Patroceni's pistol. As the man progressed to convalescence one curious thing was noticeable: he bore no grudge against the Count, who had so sternly rebuked his backsliding, but cherished the fiercest animosity against Matteo, who had brought that backsliding to his Excellency's knowledge. During those fever-tossed nights, which were the first results of Patroceni's cruel punishment, many a savage execration and fierce threat against Matteo fell from his parched lips; and Pietro, who had taken his turn in watching by his comrade's bedside, felt that those delirious words were likely to be made good should Giovanni recover.

Had there been any one conversant with all the complications of Patroceni's drama, they could have formed but one opinion of them—namely, that it is pretty sure to end tragically. The Count himself is resolute to wring that thirty thousand pounds out of his captives. Hammerton is scheming to escape from the trap into which he has fallen. Chisel, in his anxiety to discover his master, bids fair to bring the gendarmes down on the brigands, and thereby endanger the lives of the whole party. Giovanni, in his fierce thirst to avenge himself upon Matteo, is likely to draw the attention of the authorities also to the band, not from deliberately betraying his comrades, but by some savage act of bloodshed that will ring through the country. Matteo,

although as thoroughly a bandit as any of them, spends but little time amongst the mountains. He has small stomach for fighting, and likes not the crack of fire-arms or flash of steel; and he is, moreover, far more useful at the pavilion in the Villa del Reale than he would be amongst the woods. Stationed in Naples, he is in a position to obtain all sorts of information useful to the Count. Patroceni's band have only lately established themselves in the woods about Amalfi, and the travellers worth trapping, who leave Naples to visit that place, are not so numerous that they can afford to pass any over. Matteo enjoys great facilities for obtaining information on the subject of tourists' intentions, and this he at once transmits to the Count. Then, again, the police are already in possession of the story of Sir Jasper's abduction; and, what is more, the discovery has been made by Leroux, the most energetic agent amongst them. Patroceni may be loth to shed blood in the present instance, ruthless as he has been at times in that matter when it has served his purpose; but he is likely ere long to find himself so placed that it will be unavoidable. Lastly, we have old Jackson thinking that it behoves him to interfere in an affair that he doesn't understand. Much misery and loss of life have often been brought about by stupidity. An obstinate numskull has many a time set the world by the ears.

Swelling with importance at his imaginary discovery, and still keeping an eye upon the sleeping bandit, Jackson continues to turn over in his mind to whom he had better confide the result of the conversation he has overheard—whether he had better inform Mr. Glanfield or Captain Hammerton of the position in which they stand; for Jackson, by this time, has worked himself up to a belief that their fate trembles in the balance, and has in a hazy way come to the conclusion that they are only safe while their evil angel—in the form of Giovanni—sleeps. He is fascinated by the recumbent brigand, and when Giovanni turns in his sleep the dew stands upon Jackson's forehead. The man is the

very picture of the bandit as drawn in children's story-books—big, scowling, with livid face and dark, glittering eyes; a black-browed, swarthy ruffian, such as might haunt a child's dreams. Jackson has no doubt that this is the Count's right-hand man, and that when the cutting of throats is the business in hand Giovanni plays a prominent part in it. Jackson is fully convinced that the majority of the brigands have a natural taste for murder; and that, though Patroceni may protect them for a little, the hostile element will prevail sooner or later, and their lives be sacrificed, and in the opinion of Jackson that time is not far distant. Watching Giovanni's slumbers is to him like watching the sleep of the executioner on whose awakening he is condemned to die; the gaunt, haggard brigand fascinating him as the snake does the bird.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ENGLISH BRIGANDS.

The brigand of our own country differs from his Continental brother in his ways, although in cruelty and lust of plunder there is little to choose between them. The foreign bandit betakes himself to the hill-side, as our Robin Hood in days lang syne made his home chiefly in the merry greenwood. But the spread of knowledge and the progress of civilisation have changed all this in these Arcadian islands. The British bandit of the century haunts the slums of big cities as more calculated to afford prey than the forest. Like his Italian brother, the maximum of sport at the minimum of risk is his motto; and, after the manner of all his fraternity, let their country be what it will, drink and tobacco constitute his ideas of Elysium.

In one of the small streets that run between Golden Square and Soho, a quaint debateable land in which the

artisan and the adventurer live side by side, dwelt Mr. George Bludd, a little slight, dark, hook-nosed man, of an age that no one could determine, and with a complexion that is only attained by rigid economy in the matter of ablution. Mr. Bludd was of Hebrew extraction, and would have, doubtless, described himself as a sporting gentleman. In reality he was a vulture of the turf, a small bookmaker ever on the alert for robbery, and by no means particular in what shape it presented itself. Not such a halo of romance about him as there was about his Excellency Count Patroceni (he had been the accredited ambassador of a self-constituted government, which met with most practical dissolution at the hands of the executioner), but they levied their taxes after the wont of their respective countries in pretty similar fashion.

As Patroceni always thought there was something to be wrung out of a man whom chance threw in any shape within his power, so did Mr. Bludd. Robert Coleman, the footman, who had been Hammerton's confederate at Wrottsley, whose business it had been to remove those superfluous nines, after bidding adieu to the sluggish stream of country-house existence, had come to town to dissipate the wages paid him by Hammerton in all the high revelry of music-halls and Metropolitan gate-money race-meetings. At one or other of these fashionable resorts he had made the acquaintance of Mr. Bludd, who, having ascertained that he was the possessor of some ready-money, at once constituted himself his friend and comrade. He prompted him to back two or three profitable winners at Windsor and Croydon; he introduced him to one or two popular "comics" at some of the lower music-halls, and generally contrived to impress the ex-footman that he was seeing life in real earnest, and that he was singularly fortunate in having acquired the friendship of such a very knowing and agreeable gentleman as Mr. George Bludd. Now Mr. Bludd, while participating in the spending of Coleman's money,

did not fail to worm out of him his past history, and how he had come by that money. Like the Count, Mr. Bludd saw a small gold-mine in this knowledge, and his way of availing himself of his knowledge was identical with the Count's. When Coleman's funds ran short, it was Mr. Bludd suggested to him the little game of *chantage*, which had so sadly disconcerted Hammerton. The Captain, to his dismay, discovered that his two confederates in working Wheldrake's downfall were insatiable concerning their share of the plunder. The Count's demand had been beyond his power to comply with; but for the silence of Coleman's tongue he had paid by degrees no inconsiderable sum, and with the pleasant conviction that the ending of this black-mail was a matter beyond computation. Hammerton's trip to the Continent had preserved him from the English brigands, but only to throw him into the hands of their Italian namesakes.

Mr. Bludd's rooms were of that class described in the stage directions of many a farce. Scene: "Apartments, poorly furnished."

At the present moment, perhaps, a paraffin lamp and a bottle of gin were the two most noticeable objects on the rickety table by which the proprietor and his friend, the *ci-devant* footman, were seated. Mr. Bludd was a man who dined abroad at restaurants, varying in class with his chameleon circumstances. He was a haunter of public bars, such as the Criterion, where unfledged youth are wont to see life, and lay down the law upon sporting matters generally, only to be gobbled up by the well-dressed, oily sharks lying in wait for them, who listen with such deferential attention to the words of wisdom that fall from their foolish lips.

"And so, Robert, my boy, you're fairly aground, without a shot in the locker? You'll have to apply again to your old banker. Bless you, ma tear, we've been very tender with him; when you get a man under your thumb in this

fashion he must expect to provide you with all the little luxuries of life."

"But I don't know where he is, I tell you," rejoined Coleman, pettishly; "he never took the slightest notice of my last letter," and Mr. Coleman gulped down his gin-and-water in gloomy meditation.

"Most ungentlemanly thing!" replied Bludd. "By Jove, ma tear, it's absconding to avoid his liabilities! We can't submit to this sort of thing, Robert; no, no, we ain't such flats as that, eh, Robert?"

"I've no more intention of letting him off than you have; but you must catch your hare before you can skin him."

"Just so, and it may be easy to trace him. Some of your old fellow-servants can give you his address, no doubt; and, if he is so rude as not to attend to letters, you'll have to go and see him, Robert."

"What, me? I never was in those foreign parts in my life. Supposing I did know where he was, I could never find my way to him."

"You're a little raw, ma tear," replied Bludd; "you don't understand the advanced locomotion of the present day. Bless you! they'll book you to all parts of the world from London and deliver you too. You needn't know anything about it or anything of the lingo: when in doubt show your ticket, and they'll run you along somehow."

"I don't understand you," rejoined Coleman.

"Don't you, indeed?" replied Bludd, with a glance of almost compassion for his companion's innocence. "You put a rat and a ferret in a room with no outlet, and that rat will fight; give him a bolt-hole, and that rat will run away. Captain Hammerton has run away; but when ferret Coleman fairly tackles him he'll fight to save his name—fighting in his case means paying. Ah, Robert, a little pull of this kind is about as good an annuity as I know of; keep 'em always on the strain, but don't overdo it. Ma tear, always leave 'em a little money to go on with. I've got a friend, a

tear friend, who happened to make a mistake about writing his name years ago; and, bless me! he's been good for many of my little comforts since."

"Not good for much, I should think," rejoined Coleman, sullenly, "or else you wouldn't be living in such a —— hole as this."

"There you are again, Robert. That's a weak point in your character cropping up again. You're all for show, you are! Want velvet chairs; turns up your nose at a jolly old Windsor like this; goes in for silver candlesticks, never reflecting that a bottle does as well to stick a dip in as anything else. As for me, I don't care for your externals; it's your internals I like. I likes my dinner and my bottle of champagne when times are good, and that, Robert, ain't just now. Why, I haven't had hold of a real innocent for weeks. Ah, it is great to pick up with one of those young gentlemen from the Universities and be told in confidence all about racing generally, and when they want some one to back horses for them! Eh, Robert?" and Mr. Bludd winked his eye and indulged in a prolonged chuckle, as he thought of the many young men whose pockets he had helped to lighten during their academical career.

"I must have money somehow," remarked Coleman, as he puffed savagely at the blackish cigar he was smoking.

"Ah, you remind me of a great friend of mine. That was his very remark, 'I must have money.' He was a splendid fellow, and, when he said *that*, somebody had to suffer; but he carried it too far at last."

"What do you mean?" inquired Coleman, impatiently.

"Well, the last time he was in such urgent want of it he got it as usual; but there was an old gentleman who was perverse enough to die under the pressure put upon him, and twelve pig-headed shopkeepers returned a verdict adverse to my friend."

"You don't mean to say he murdered a man?" ejaculated Coleman, quite aghast at the relation.

"Of course not; the old gentleman was a nervous subject, and died probably of heart-complaint. My friend was so disgusted that he took off his hat to his fellow-creatures shortly afterwards."

"And was ——?" exclaimed Coleman, excitedly.

"Nothing," interposed Mr. Bludd, quietly; "but that don't affect my regard for his memory."

"He was hung, in short?"

"What's the good of using coarse language!" rejoined Mr. Bludd, with a half-twinkle in his eye. "Say he met with a bad accident from insecure scaffolding."

So it was settled between this precious pair that Mr. Coleman should then and there write to Jackson, the butler at Wrottsley, and endeavour to ascertain Captain Hammerton's address. That he got no reply to that letter was a matter of course; but he very soon ascertained that the Captain was travelling with Sir Jasper on the Continent, and was not expected back till the autumn. Moreover, he was informed that the party were constantly on the move, and were at present somewhere in Italy. Even Mr. Bludd did not see exactly what was to be done under the circumstances. As a curious instance of how similar in their instincts are these vultures of society, the same idea at once occurred to Mr. Bludd that had presented itself to Patroceni, to wit—To whom was the information Coleman could give valuable? If further money was not to be wrung from Hammerton, the secret surely was saleable to the man who had suffered for his (Hammerton's) crime. But there, like the Count, he was checkmated by the fact that Wheldrake was no more accessible than the Captain. The great Mr. Bludd was fain to confess at last that there was nothing to be done but wait.

Now, a man who has abandoned himself to a life of debauchery, such as Coleman had led of late, loathes the idea of work, and needs fairly-lined pockets. Wait!—that is just what he could not afford to do. He was not like his friend Mr. Bludd, who was never likely to want a living

while foolish people traversed the earth. Mr. Bludd was a past-master in the art of preying on his neighbours, and had endless shifts and devices wherewith to cozen the stranger who fell into his clutches; but Coleman was as yet a mere neophyte, more likely to be shorn than to bring home wool, should he betake himself to predatory practices.

Still, that powerful source of crime and revolution, the unsatisfied intestine, was working powerfully upon Coleman; he did not relish rough fare nor abstinence in the matter of strong waters; while his whilom crony, Mr. Bludd, who had only been too happy to feast at his expense while the money lasted, showed no disposition to return his hospitality. On the contrary, Mr. Bludd evinced a decided disposition to give him the cold shoulder, and expressed considerable contempt for men who were such "duffers as not to be able to lay their hands on a five-pound note."

"I suppose you've been high and dry before this?" remarked Coleman, sullenly, in answer to a most decided negative regarding a small loan on Bludd's part.

"Don't I tell you I am now, ma tear, or of course I'd oblige a gentleman in trouble; but the sooner you gets to work the better."

Mr. Bludd, when excited, was apt to be wanting in the matter of diction.

"I tell you I've no intention of returning to the dull drudgery of service," rejoined Coleman.

"Certainly not, Robert, certainly not; but you'll have to go about with your eyes skinned, and try your hand at picking up some of the gold and silver that's strewn about the Tom Tiddler's ground of London."

"If I only knew how to begin," said Coleman, wearily.

"That's where it is," said Mr. Bludd, as he twisted his stubbly moustache; "that's what's the matter with you provincials; you've no originality. Why, bless you, when it comes to getting your living on the cross you have no idea of anything but petty larceny. I've not been at the game

for some time; but you see, ma tear, I got the needle at Goodwood, and racing ain't agreed with my health ever since. It's a pretty mean sort of way of making money, and you're liable to do time if you're nailed; but, as I'm about broke, we must have a turn at the confidence trick. It's beneath a man of my intellect; but then, you see, Robert, my boy, you ain't up to much, and it's just about suited to your calibre."

"Well," said Coleman, "I don't much like it, but money I must have. Still, surely, that's too old a dodge."

"Old! Bless you, I should think it was common in Babylon, and an ordinary game in the city of Damascus. There's one crop never fails, Robert, and that's green-goslings; and they trot about London clothed in their down, with their beaks open, and believe implicitly what the London sparrows tell them. You ain't a bird-fancier, Robert—more's the pity—you ought to study the London sparrow; for cheek and cunning he beats creation. Foxes, bah! serpents, not in it! A London sparrow would give either twenty in a hundred and beat them easy. You don't catch him with the confidence trick; he believes in nobody, and is afraid of nobody! Don't you be down on your luck; we'll pick up our green-gosling before forty-eight hours are over; he's about a-waiting to be plucked, and he'll waddle home pretty naked when I have done with him."

And so a thing came about which has some little influence on this history. Coleman and his friend Bludd laid themselves out to perform the confidence trick, a description of which is almost superfluous, familiar as it must be to all readers of the daily papers.

Bludd was a very little while before he picked up his green-gosling. Then came the usual exposure of flash notes on his part, and the time-honoured story of his having a thousand pounds left him to dispose of in charity. At this juncture Coleman, of course, turns up with five hundred pounds in flash notes intrusted to him to start a deserving

man in business. The usual result followed—exchange of pocket-books; and the one man remained in the room to show his implicit confidence while the other took a short stroll with his pocket-book. Of course, things terminated in the usual way; it came to Bludd and Coleman's turn at last to take their short stroll with the gosling's pocket-book. Needless to say, they forgot to stroll back again. So far fortune had favoured the sparrows; but one, alas! was no genuine London sparrow. The gosling got tired of waiting; the gosling got wrathful, as men will when they have lost their money and been made fools of to boot. Sad to say, he lost confidence, and invoked the aid of the police. Mr. Bludd vanished with the rapidity of a fraudulent bank director. Mr. Coleman, easy man, continued to frequent his usual haunts, and found himself run in by the authorities before forty-eight hours were over his head. It was the old sequel —six months' imprisonment to the neophyte who had fallen into the toils, and deep regret on the part of the magistrate that his companion did not stand beside him in the dock.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"FOR MAUDE'S SAKE."

Captain Hammerton might be extravagant, might be untruthful, and might possibly have many other faults to boot, but there was one thing no man could accuse him of neglecting, and that was his own interest. It was quite clear to him, and he was not without warrant in drawing such conclusion, that no life amongst them all was in such hazard. He had taken it into his head that Wheldrake had acquired great influence over the bandit chief. He could not stoop

to solicit the intercession of the man whom he had so grossly wronged, but, for all that, Hammerton did not see why he should not utilise Wheldrake's interest by a side-wind. He had paved the way for all this. He had promised that Maude should have an interview with Wheldrake, and she stood pretty well pledged to interfere in his behalf. Good! that was not difficult, and he would take very good care it was done at once. A line to Wheldrake to say that Maude wished to see him was little likely to lack attention and some one to convey it was not difficult to find.

Wheldrake was sitting on his bed preparatory to turning in for a few hours' sleep. He knew he had a tedious journey before him, and the quicker he could compass it the more quickly would those very dear to him be rescued from a situation of discomfort and suspense. Like a prudent man Cyril was anxious to husband his resources and take rest whilst he could. But he was strangely wakeful; the prospect of clearing his name and the knowledge that his peerless Maude was in the hands of Patroceni and his crew had banished sleep from his eyelids. It was all very well; the Count chose to play the *bon diable* just now, but he knew that he could be ruthless as a maddened tiger when crossed. He recalled the unsparing punishment meted out to Giovanni but a few days back, and recognised that any intervention of the police would place them all in imminent danger of their lives. He reflected that, though a stray traveller like himself might be kidnapped without attracting much attention, the disappearance of such a party as Sir Jasper's would be speedily brought to the notice of the authorities, and the English Consul would insist on their acting with promptitude and vigour. This was the great danger those he left behind him would run, that the gendarmes might be on the track of the band before he could reach Naples to warn them not to interfere. He was musing over all these things when one of the brigands, putting his head into the tent, held up a note and intimated that it was

for the signor. Wheldrake tore open the note, which was in a hand he did not recognise.

"Maude Eversley is extremely anxious to see you before you start. If you retain any affection for her be at the back of the hut in an hour. She has something of importance to say to you."

Retain any affection for her! Was she not still all the world to him? Meet her! of course he would, and he turned to convey that assurance to the bearer, but he had disappeared. Wheldrake took out his watch, and, having glanced at it, laid it upon the bed, and awaited impatiently the expiration of the intervening time. To lovers, they say, such moments are leaden-sandaled; but Wheldrake was so absorbed in the whole situation that he did not find the time hang so heavy as most of his fellow-sufferers in like circumstances. Before his watch marked the stroke of ten he was pacing restlessly up and down in the rear of the hut. It was dark, for the moon had not risen as yet. Here and there a dim spark like a glowworm glanced through the gloom, a faint glimmer of some bandit's cigarette unfavoured of Somnus. Scarce a breath stirred the trees; it was a spot well fitted for a true lover's meeting. Wheldrake had not long to wait. A few minutes and the form he knew well stole round the hut and advanced towards him.

"My darling!" exclaimed Cyril, "I am so pleased to meet you once again;" and he would fain have taken her in his arms, but the girl drew back and replied,

"Mr. Wheldrake, I have sent for you in order to ask a favour at your hands."

Cyril shrank back aghast. This cold response to his passionate speech was like a shower-bath, and it was in very different tones that he responded,

"Anything I can do to oblige Miss Eversley she knows I shall be only too happy to attend to at once."

It was, what is so common in this world, a case of misconception. He had never written or let her hear of him in

any way, and she mistrusted her hold on his regard. On the other hand, her "Mr. Wheldrake" and rejection of his embrace confirmed him in the idea that she had thoroughly put him away from her favour, and gave confirmation to the report that she was now engaged to her cousin. A terrible scoundrel this latter in Wheldrake's estimation; but he knew that it is not always the true knights who prove attractive to a lady's eyes.

It has ever been so. The paladins of old went down in the boudoir before some carpet-knight who shrank from the clash of the steel in earnest; as even now the hero of a score of tough tussels is passed over for the drawing-room dandy, who lives his little life of eye-glass, ignorance, arrogance, superciliousness, and *failure*.

Wheldrake said no more. He waited to see what Miss Eversley would say next. She need fear no further effusiveness on his part. He was far too sensitive concerning the stain on his name to think of reasserting the privilege of a lover in the face of such a rebuff as he had encountered.

"I am given to understand," said Maude, "that you have considerable interest with Count Patroceni."

"You have been misinformed, Miss Eversley," rejoined Cyril. "I met him for the first time at Homburg last year; met him again at Wrottsley, as you know. You saw what passed between us there. Is it likely I am his friend, or have influence over him? I am his prisoner, like yourselves. The man to me is a mystery. He was the prominent worker of my ruin, and yet he undoubtedly seems kindly disposed towards me since I have been in his hands. But that is a very different thing from having interest with him. I, as you have doubtless heard, am going as the accredited ambassador to negotiate for our ransom; but that, again, you probably know, was the mere luck of lot-drawing. It is no pleasant thought to think that I carry your lives in my hand—that any imprudence on my part may jeopardise them."

"You must not suppose that we could wish our case in other hands. We all know how thoroughly we can rely upon your management. You underrate your influence with Count Patroceni, Mr. Wheldrake. I am given to understand, curious as it may seem to you, that he is much prepossessed in your favour."

"What! The man whom you yourself heard proclaim me cheat and blackleg at Wrottsley? Absurd! The Count is cruel and capricious, if I know anything of his nature. He treats his prisoners as the cat does the mouse within its claws. I could fancy his captives undergoing the fate of Agag when they had quite convinced themselves that the bitterness of death was past."

They were calling each other "Mr. Wheldrake" and "Miss Eversley." Little had they thought on that sad night at Wrottsley that when next they met they should address each other in such constrained fashion; but it is so easy to drift apart when the feelings are involved and a misunderstanding has arisen.

"You may be right," rejoined Maude. "You have had greater opportunities and are far more capable than myself of forming an opinion; but that only makes it more imperative that you should use your influence, if influence you have. You are friendly with my cousin."

"He took part against me in my hour of need," returned Wheldrake, sternly.

"So did my father," returned Maude, in tones which shook a little. "The appearances which misled the one might well mislead the other."

Wheldrake started as if stung. Where was the wild, generous confidence of the girl who scorned to believe aught against the fair fame of her lover? Maude spoke calmly and judicially as one who would say, "I do not hold you guilty; but, you must own, appearances were against you."

"I am only too anxious to obey Miss Eversley's behests

if within my power," replied Wheldrake, with studied politeness.

The girl drew herself up proudly, and it was almost imperiously that she rejoined, "I should have thought an innate sense of justice and natural compassion would have prompted you to succour a fellow-creature in danger, even if he had made the mistake of once judging you harshly. My cousin Fred Hammerton, you know, is in imminent danger here. Our capricious captor has exhibited a dislike of him even as he has shown a kindly inclination towards yourself. If you think this mere woman's imagining on my part, ask your friend Mr. Glanfield, who says he wouldn't take a hundred to one about Fred's life."

"I have had little, I might say no, opportunity of forming an opinion on that point," he replied coldly. "I only know that he was the Count's friend, that it was he originally who introduced him to all of us, that it was at Captain Hammerton's suggestion Sir Jasper asked him to Wrottsley, and that when he brought that foul charge against myself it was Captain Hammerton who sided with him and put his word before mine as worthy of credence."

"You must not be too hard upon Fred for that!" she cried, vehemently. "Remember that he had known the Count longer than he had you; that, called on to decide in such hurried fashion, he might well stand up for the loyalty of his friend. He did not know what Patroceni was in those times. I doubt whether we any of us quite understand him as yet."

Wheldrake remained silent for some little time after Maude's speech. There could be no doubt about it, the opinion of the world had proved too strong for her, and she had thrust him from her heart; perchance was no longer so sure of his innocence as she had been in the first instance. It was a cruel disappointment. Of what availed it to clear his name when she, for whose sake he had striven so hard

to do so, refused to share it; and that Maude Eversley would say him nay should he again put his fortune to the test Cyril entertained no doubt—cast aside, too, for a man like Hammerton. Did women ever love in earnest he wondered.

"I have no wish to be hard upon Hammerton," he said at length; "though he was not very lenient to me. But I am still quite in the dark. What is it, Miss Eversley, you want me to do?"

"Save my cousin's life! I know it rests within your power. A strong remonstrance from you, before you start on your journey, will stay Patroceni's coward hand," cried Maude, excitedly.

"Hush, Miss Eversley, pray restrain yourself," interposed Wheldrake, in a low voice. "We shall rouse the whole camp, and no good can come of that. I have told you before that you are much mistaken concerning my influence over Patroceni. Never mind that, we will suppose that you are right. Do you care very much for Captain Hammerton?"

"One usually loves one's own flesh and blood," she retorted, tartly. "I have been brought up with Fred, and that I love him dearly is, I suppose, nothing astounding." And the girl's eyes flashed almost defiantly at her companion.

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten," he retorted, coldly, "though cousinship is not always of so warm a growth. Never mind. Hammerton's life is matter of deep moment to you. I can promise but little; still, if the chance comes to me, to save it, I pledge you my honour it shall be done."

"Farewell, *bon voyage*, and good luck," said Maude, as she extended her hand, which Wheldrake barely touched; and then the young lady flew rapidly back to the hut, and, burying her head on her pillow, cried her eyes out.

"Save that hound!" muttered Wheldrake, as he walked back to his tent. "Well, if she wills it, so must it be. I'd chance my life to save a canary she cared about any time.

But, his life safe, she shall know the whole story, and decide whether he is better than the banned man she has rejected. She is right. Hammerton's life no doubt is in danger. There is a possibility of insuring his safety, and, for Maude's sake, I'll try it.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHELDRAKE FULFILS HIS PROMISE.

Darkness reigned over the camp, and its denizens were for the most part locked in slumber. Wheldrake lay stretched upon his bed without the faintest inclination to close his eyes. It was bitter to think that this girl, to whom he had given all the passionate love of his being, had ceased to care for him. Yes, he would do it; do it for her sake. It might or might not come off; but that he was risking his life in either case he could not in the least disguise from himself—his life more in danger perhaps should he succeed in the daring attempt he meditated. One privilege only he reserved to himself with steady determination. Maude should know what manner of man this was for whom she had put his love away from her. Yes, there must be a certain amount of trickery all round in it. He had deceived Maude, he was going to attempt to deceive Patroceni and his gang. They were men who stood no nonsense, and it was very likely that short shrift would be his when he was detected; and Hammerton—yes, to a certain extent he must deceive even him; for very manhood Hammerton would decline to accede to his scheme otherwise. A man may be a great scoundrel, but no cur; and, though Wheldrake regarded Fred Hammerton as liar, blackleg, and villain, yet even he never doubted his courage. Now the question was when should he commence proceedings. Glanfield and Hammerton had fared no better than old Jackson in their

bedroom accommodation; like him they had the turf for a couch, the sky for a coverlet. Still, Wheldrake knew pretty well where they were stretched; not so close together he had noticed while waiting to keep his appointment with Maude but it would be possible to wake the one without disturbing the other. Although there was no doubt about there being several sentries round the fringe of the wood—their eternal cigarettes gleaming like fire-flies proved that only too conclusively—these men made no attempt to interfere with the movements of the prisoners within their cordon. Wheldrake rose and stepped cautiously out into the darkness of the summer night. All was still save the faint sigh of the breeze through the trees, but Wheldrake fancied even now he could catch a glimpse in the sky of the rising moon, although that luminary was not as yet visible. He listened long and attentively at the door of Patroceni's tent; he even ventured to crouch down and steal his head under the bottom curtain. The quiet, low, regular breathing of the sleeper completely reassured him. Then he made his way softly in the direction of the spot where he knew Hammerton had laid himself down. It might be rough accommodation, but Wheldrake could not but remark that though stretched beneath the stars they had never slept sounder within the walls of Wrottsley. Cautiously he made his way until he came to Hammerton, and, stooping down, placed his hand lightly on his shoulder.

Hammerton would have sprung to his feet at once had not Wheldrake's firm grasp restrained him.

"Hush!" he whispered, "not a word! Get up and follow me. Your life is in extreme danger."

Hammerton rose without further comment, and quietly followed Wheldrake back into the tent. When they got within it, Cyril said coldly—

"I told you next time we played, Captain Hammerton, our lives would be the stake, little thinking my wild words would so soon come to pass. I have little cause to love you,

little cause to spare you, but I cannot see you murdered in cold blood. None of our lives are, I believe, in any jeopardy but yours. Patroceni, for reasons we have no time to go into, seems to have conceived a peculiar animosity to yourself, and you will be the victim should there be any hitch in the negociations. We must change places."

"We shall do nothing of the sort," said Hammerton, quietly; "I don't for one instant admit the allegations that it has pleased Patroceni to make against myself. I have been his dupe even more than you. I must pay the penalty."

"Nonsense, I tell you I am in no danger; *you* are! Don't think even now you won't run a tremendous risk. I will describe it to you, and you shall elect then whether or no you will attempt to escape. Your escort is, or was to be, Sarini, the Count's right-hand man. He knows, as they all do, that I won the drawing of lots which decided who was to go into Naples about this ransom. For the others, that this arrangement has been changed will not, I think, seem very astonishing; to Sarini it probably would, for he is very much more in Patroceni's confidence than any of the others. I should scarcely have suggested this change of parts to you if I had not heard that Sarini had to-day met with an accident. That accident may prevent his being your escort."

"No, Wheldrake, I can hardly buy my life at your hands in this fashion. Luck has ordained that you are to go to Naples—go."

"It shall be as you wish," returned Wheldrake, coolly. "You will run quite risk enough if you attempt my scheme; if your nerve fails you don't try it," he concluded, coldly.

The taunt stung Hammerton as it was intended to do. He felt it was better to die in a daring attempt to escape than to go like a sheep to the shambles—the risk tempted him as Cyril meant that it should. He hesitated for a few minutes and then said, "Mr. Wheldrake, I am in your hands; you shall do what you deem best for myself and the rest of us."

"Good! then you will go?" rejoined Wheldrake. "There is a big cloak and a sombrero to slouch over your brows. Lie down on that bed; I shall be on the ground behind it. Let me speak for you in the first instance, and if I find Sarini is to accompany you it is too risky to be attempted; otherwise I believe my plan to be quite feasible."

"I accept your offer," replied Hammerton, "and pledge myself to be guided by you in every particular."

"Then remember this," said Wheldrake, in low tones of concentrated passion: "I am doing my best to save your life at the bidding of one for whom I would risk fifty lives if I had them. Be false to your trust, put a hair of her head or that of any of the rest of them in danger, and I will slay you with my own hand, wherever I find you, should I escape from the hands of Patroceni. What wrong you have done me I pardon you; but fail me now and you have an enemy who recks his life as nothing, and will be thoroughly unsparing in his vengeance."

"A tempting offer!" sneered Hammerton. "I risk my life in attempting to escape—chance number one against me. I make a relentless enemy if I bungle my mission—chance number two against me. I only risk my life if I stay here. Two to one against your scheme. On the whole I think I will remain.

"As you will. One can only draw the bolts for a captive; if he's afraid to run the gauntlet of the warders one can do no more. Be it as you wish."

"I am not afraid," rejoined Hammerton, fiercely, "though I have no fancy to die if I can help it. You'll not see me blench if these beggars put me up for a target to-morrow."

"I have fulfilled my promise," said Wheldrake, coldly, as he walked leisurely to the door of the tent; "it is for you to decide. You may estimate your danger more correctly than I do, but I think it may go hard with you here."

He glanced out at the moon now visibly rising behind the trees. "You have not much longer to make up your mind,"

he remarked over his shoulder; "the moon will top the cedars before half-an-hour is past, and that seems to be the signal-gun for all expeditions in this camp."

Hammerton made no reply, but sat upon the bed plunged apparently in sullen reverie. Wheldrake paid no attention to him, but stood at the tent-door, apparently equally absorbed in his own thoughts.

"They are stirring amongst the trees," he remarked at last as he turned and walked slowly back into the tent. "Wrap yourself in the cloak. Pull the sombrero well over your brows, and lie down upon the bed."

For a minute or two Hammerton hesitated, and then without the slightest comment did what Wheldrake desired. An interval of ten minutes, and then "Signor, signor!" was uttered in Sarini's tones through the door of the tent. "It is time you were on the move."

"Hist!" whispered Wheldrake, as he laid his hand on Hammerton's breast. "Let me speak to them and see how the land lies."

"Ah, signor!" said Sarini, as Wheldrake appeared, "I am so distressed that the fates forbid me to be your escort. I can but see you start, and bid you God-speed. I twisted my ancle crossing the stepping-stones of the rivulet this afternoon—slipped on that treacherous centre-stone where the lichen grows so strongly—and, *Corpo di Baccho!* my limb is no better to me at present than a wooden one."

The man was walking with a stick and the assistance of one of his fellows.

"I regret, Signor Sarini, not to have the benefit of your guidance," replied Wheldrake, courteously, "and more especially the misfortune that deprives me of it; but I have no doubt that you have selected a perfectly efficient deputy."

Sarini shrugged his shoulders, and said quietly, "Pietro will do his best, signor."

It reminded Wheldrake of the famous line at the conclusion of "Plot and Passion," when Fouché takes the pinch

of snuff upon hearing his portfolio is withdrawn, and exclaims, "What! Savary after me!" It was the equivalent to the Bourbons after Napoleon clearly in Sarini's eyes. "He is probably right," thought Wheldrake, "but it is much more to my purpose that it should be so. Savary is far preferable to that terrible Duke of Otranto in such circumstances."

"I shall be ready for you in a few minutes," he replied, and turned back again into the tent. "Listen!" he continued in a low voice, as he gripped Hammerton's arm, "your chance has come; don't let your nerve fail you. Keep your face well muffled against the raw air of the morning, and, above all, don't speak if you can help it, and then as briefly as possible. Here they are again—now." Hammerton rose quickly from the bed, and, as Wheldrake said aloud, "Quite ready, Signor Sarini," stepped through the door of the tent.

It was an anxious moment for Hammerton. Who could say that amongst the little group outside might not be Patroceni to give some last instructions; but such fears proved groundless. Sarini was there, leaning on a stick, and evidently in pain. He contented himself with bidding the supposed Wheldrake a brief adieu, and, handing him over to Pietro and three of his comrades, waved his hand as a signal for the party to proceed. Two or three minutes, and they were through the sentries, and rapidly threading their way through the wood.

At the expiration of about ten minutes they stopped, and Pietro gave a low whistle, which was almost instantly replied to. Another minute or two, and from amidst the trees came a man leading a mule, on the back of which was, apparently, a rude ambulance. Hammerton gazed with no little astonishment at this addition to their number; and Pietro, after exchanging a few words apparently with the occupant of the ambulance, gave the signal to proceed, and said:—

"Ah! signor, it is only that poor devil Giovanni, who was

near losing his life on your account. You saw him struck down, and only he has a skull of granite there would have been only his burial to see about; but he's come round. He wants nursing and better food than we can give him here to restore his strength. Ah! signor, his Excellency is merciless in his anger. He does not get in a passion like other men; but one would be safer with one possessed than with him. There just comes a glitter in his eye, such as one could fancy in a tiger's before it springs, and the boldest man might tremble for his safety then."

Now this was, of course, to a great extent incomprehensible to Hammerton. He had never heard of Giovanni; but it was clear that he was the victim of the Count's wrath, and had narrowly escaped with his life. That was a circumstance that did not much interest Hammerton; but these revelations of Patroceni's ruthless temper had a strange fascination for him, and, regardless of Wheldrake's caution, he could not resist saying:—

"You stand in great dread of his Excellency, apparently?"

This, however, did not produce the premature discovery that Wheldrake was so anxious to avoid. He argued that, should the discovery be made close to the camp, the brigands in charge of Hammerton might refer back to the Count or Sarini for fresh instructions: but if they were well on their way they would hesitate to lose the time that would necessitate. One of the party was as good as another for arranging this matter of ransom, and nothing was more probable than that the decision of the lots had been changed by mutual arrangement amongst themselves. But Pietro had not been in close charge of Wheldrake like Sarini, and was, consequently, by no means familiar with his voice, and it was without mistrust he replied:—

"I've chanced my life, like all of us, many a time; but it would be all child's play to falling under the ban of his Excellency. Signor, those who for fear of the authorities would turn against him, don't know him. I'd rather be a

marked man by the police in all Europe than incur the chief's displeasure. I'd feel safer in prison yonder," and he waved his hand, as Hammerton supposed, in the direction of Naples, "than know myself the object of his Excellency's enmity."

They continued to push forward at a rapid rate, and, as the sun got higher in the heavens, Hammerton felt his cloak oppressively warm. The sharp walk had constrained his companions to throw aside the upper mufflings which most of them had worn at starting, and they were now swinging along with these garments either thrown over their arms or on the reverse side of the ambulance containing Giovanni. Hammerton felt at last that he must follow their example, and discard his cloak. He threw it back, and Pietro immediately exclaimed:—

"Let me throw it on the mule for you. The signor will travel easier." Then, as he took the cloak from him, and the broad daylight disclosed Hammerton's identity, he ejaculated, "Holy Virgin, it's the other signor!"

"You were not told, then, by Sarini?" replied Hammerton, nonchalantly; "he would hardly think it worth mentioning. It was settled among ourselves I should go after all."

For a few moments Pietro looked puzzled, but then he reflected that Sarini had fetched Hammerton out of the tent, and handed the prisoner over to him. It must be all right; besides, his orders were to lose no time in getting to the outskirts of Naples, where the prisoner was to be free to follow his own dictates.

"His Excellency knows best," grumbled Pietro; "but I don't see the use of drawing lots if you're not to abide by them; however, my orders are to see you to Naples," and Pietro strode on in silence.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE GAME BEGINS.

Police-agent Leroux meanwhile is highly delighted with his discovery; a case this after his own heart; his head against the chief of the banditti—an illiterate, ignorant robber, no doubt: why it was a case of a game between a rough provincial performer and a skilled artist! Capital! Bold, commonplace cut-throat sends in and demands ransom; prisoners to lose their ears or lips if the money be not forthcoming by date named by envoy entrusted with this marauding mountain-kinglet's commission; living like other royal but more recognised families on irregular taxation. Clearly the business of police-agent Leroux was to outwit this bandit, and lay him and his crew by the heels as speedily as might be. Leroux did not overlook the fact that he had a delicate affair to manipulate, a matter requiring infinite skill and *finesse*. He had in the first instance to get Sir Jasper and his party safely out of the hands of his abductors, and that without paying the ransom which he had no doubt would be placed upon them. Secondly, police-agent Leroux was not as yet satisfied regarding Mr. Chisel. He could not decide as to whether the valet was an innocent man or an exceeding crafty villain. When Chisel suggested on their return journey to Naples that it might be his master had also fallen into the hands of the brigands, Leroux rather scoffed at the idea; but he had since come to the conclusion that that solution of Signor Wheldrake's disappearance was very possible. Quite likely that he had fallen into the hands of these gentry somewhere between Pompeii and Naples; still, in the meanwhile, it would be well to keep a watchful eye on Chisel.

Police-agent Leroux was quite impatient for the next move of the enemy. Until their envoy arrived in Naples he felt he could do nothing. That envoy might even be in

Naples at this moment, and he not know it. He questioned and requestioned Chisel with a view to discovering with whom Sir Jasper would be likely to communicate; but, though the valet was quick-witted enough, he could only suggest people already obvious to Leroux—the English Consul, Sir Jasper's bankers, with all of whom the police-agent was already in communication. Nothing for M. Leroux, evidently, but to wait the appearance of the bandits' emissary in Naples; sooner or later he was bound to disclose himself, as he could hardly hope to carry his mission to a successful conclusion without doing so; till then both he and Chisel were doomed to that most trying of all things in times of excitement—inaction.

Leroux counted on getting the first news of Sir Jasper's party from his bankers. The bureau of the police the brigands' messenger would, if wise in his generation, naturally shun, any interference of the myrmidons of law being calculated to sign the death-warrant of those he had left behind him. The Neapolitan police might be quite incompetent to deal with wit, but they had wide experience of the ways of brigandage, and thoroughly understood the customary usages of the craft. Without the system of ransom it would be a poor calling; as what Mr. Wemmick terms the "portable property," carried by travellers in these days, would be poor recompense for the risk and hardships of the profession; but that grand old institution of the Middle Ages, the holding prisoners to ransom, was extremely profitable; and, though a case so near Naples had been rare of late, yet in more remote districts messieurs the brigands had given proof that they were not to be trifled with.

One morning police-agent Leroux was informed that the chief of the bureau desired to see him, and upon his repairing to that functionary's cabinet he was addressed with—

"Well, Leroux, these scoundrels have spoken at last; but, if it hadn't been for your judicious arrangement with the

head-clerk of Toldi and Kratz, I fancy we should never have heard of it."

"Ah! they should be more liberal in the matter of salary to confidential clerks."

"You had better go down with this note from me; tell them"—and here the great man almost swelled with the importance of his position—"that nothing escapes the knowledge of the Neapolitan police: that your orders are to be present at their next interview with this envoy from these scoundrels of the mountains; that we have made up our minds to settle with these gentry and put an end to such a scandal so near the city. You will, of course, take care to he disguised; make yourself up in any character that seems good to you."

"Very good, signor," rejoined Leroux, "your orders shall be attended to at once, and I shall, of course, report to you as soon as possible. Old imbecile!" he muttered to himself as he left the room, "if I followed his instructions these English would never see their miserable island again."

Once in his own room, and Leroux's spirits rose, like that supposititious war-horse which sniffs the battle from afar. Disguise himself! Bah! There was not much necessity for that; still it might simplify matters if he were to dress after the fashion of a banker's clerk; perhaps it might be as well to conceal his identity; and working out a thing of this kind he knew from experience that it was always as well to keep your real personal appearance in the background as far as possible. A police-agent, like an actor, is simply not master of his profession unless he can, so to speak, jump, after a few minutes' preparation, into a new skin. If he cannot make up so as to defy recognition he can never hope to achieve the first rank as a detective. It is essential that an officer of this class should be protean. Child's play all this to Leroux. False eyebrows, a wig, a few dashes of the pigments, a change of clothes, and he walked out into the street an elderly clerk of some business house, instead of the

smart-looking police-agent, and made his way quietly down to the banking establishment of Toldi and Kratz.

The astonishment of the partners when Leroux sent in his note was extreme. Hammerton had requested them to keep his presence in the city a profound secret, and more especially from the police; and the bankers were wondrously puzzled as to how on earth the police had learnt that Patroceni's envoy had arrived in the city, for, thanks to Hammerton, Messrs. Toldi and Kratz knew who the chief of the brigands was, a fact of which the police were as yet in ignorance. It was awkward—very awkward; they had pledged their word to Captain Hammerton to communicate neither with the police nor the English Consul. Hammerton, despite everything that had gone before, was undoubtedly desirous of acting loyally and doing his very best for the captives he had left behind him. That any interference of the police might prove hazardous he thoroughly comprehended, yet here was the very thing he was so anxious to guard against about to take place.

Signor Toldi remarked that it was very awkward, and Signor Kratz replied that it was very unfortunate, but no one ever dreamt of disputing the decrees of the police in Naples; and so at last Signor Toldi gave orders that the bearer of the note was to be admitted. A few minutes and Leroux was ushered into the room, in appearance the *facsimile* of an old banking-clerk. The partners stared with considerable surprise at the new comer; they had never experienced the visitation of the police before, and their representative was so utterly unlike what they had expected.

"Perhaps you will take a chair," said Toldi, the senior partner, "and explain a little more comprehensively what it is you wish, signor—signor ——" and then the banker took his double eye-glass out for the purpose of reading the agent's card.

"Leroux," interposed that gentleman, quietly; "this case is in my hands, and the sooner I explain to you what I mean doing the better. It can be told you in one word—Nothing. You will allow me just to hear what demands these gentlemen make, and we shall exercise our own discretion in dealing with them in future; for the present we are quite aware it would be most injudicious on our part to interfere."

"But the ambassador of these brigands is most desirous to keep his mission a secret as far as possible."

"He is, of course, one of the prisoners themselves, released to negotiate for the freedom of his companions. Nothing is easier than for me to be present when he arrives. He has come to you for a large sum of money. Well, I am Signor Stein, the money-lender, who proposes to help you in raising the sum required if I see my way, but I naturally wish to understand the whole of a delicate transaction like this. If it is blundered I may find that I have parted with my money and that those to whom I look for payment are dead. Emphatically there must be no interference of the police. I decline to advance a stiver if it is not carefully kept from their ears; they are quite as much bandits as the others, and will think, not of the lives of the captives, but how they can make most money."

The bankers started at this touch of Leroux's histrionic powers. He had thrown himself at once into his assumed character, and was to all intents the shrewd business-like money-lender, anxious to do a profitable stroke of business, if the risk were not excessive.

A smile of satisfaction crossed Leroux's face at the astonishment of the partners. It was an unfeigned compliment to his powers as an artist, and no man—much less a Frenchman—but would thoroughly appreciate that. "You will do what I want, I see. When do you expect the bandit's emissary?"

"Almost immediately," replied Signor Toldi; "but do you know who you have against you? Are you aware who this bandit chief is?"

"Certainly not. This to our knowledge is the very first outrage perpetrated by the band in this neighbourhood. I have no doubt we shall arrive at his name in a day or two, and find a very complete biography of him in our books."

"Yes; you'll know his name well enough when you hear it," suddenly ejaculated Kratz. "You've got against you the most daring, most ruthless, and cleverest man that ever fate drove to the mountains,—a man of high birth, great abilities, and good education. I can speak with authority; for I have been in his hands, and am a poor man comparatively to this day in consequence."

"There is only one man in our annals answers that description," interposed Leroux, excitedly. "Do you mean to say that it is Patroceni himself?"

"Yes!" almost screamed Kratz; "the villain who wrung from me the hard earnings of years. But what would you? Life is sweet, and it was that or my gold. I would not sign the drafts they put before me till I found myself bound and looking down the muzzles of half-a-score carbines. I caught my breath at the word 'Ready'—it was weak; but when Patroceni, after a minute's interval, gave the word 'Present!' I cried out, 'I will sign!—I will sign!"

"And I suppose at the next word they were to fire?"

Kratz nodded assent; and it was evident that the old man's thoughts went back to that morning, years ago, when he had made up his mind to look on the sunlight for the last time, and blenched at the last moment in the face of the levelled carbines.

He was very much older than his partner, and it was only by the withdrawal of the bulk of his capital, which entailed the forfeiture of his position as leading partner in the house, that he had procured the wherewithal to satisfy Patroceni's exorbitant demands.

"It's a very sore subject with him, poor fellow!" said Signor Toldi, in a low tone, to Leroux. "This Count Patroceni, he says truly, well-nigh ruined him years ago."

At this moment one of the clerks entered with a card, and, after glancing at it, the banker gave orders to show the gentleman in.

"This Captain Hammerton," continued Toldi, "is the prisoner the Count has released to treat for the ransom of his captives."

Leroux said nothing; he was endeavouring to recall what he had heard about this Patroceni. At the bureau they were full of stories of his audacity and ability both as brigand and political outlaw; but during the two or three years that Leroux had been in the Italian service nothing had been heard of him; and Leroux regarded him as a somewhat mythical personage, upon whom all tales of audacious violence were fathered, and now he was committed to a veritable duel with the celebrated outlaw.

Leroux, as said before, was an enthusiast in his profession. He felt as a keen sportsman might feel on receiving the intelligence that there was a stag-royal on the hillside—as the Indian shikaree might feel when he heard there was a tiger of mark in his immediate vicinity.

Another moment, and Hammerton enters. He has been to his hotel, dressed, breakfasted, and washed all stain of travel from his person. A good-looking, dashing, ex-soldier, whom Leroux regards attentively. He greets the partners with easy assurance; but, at the sight of the police-agent, stops abruptly.

"The business I've come about, Signor Toldi, is strictly private, as you know."

"Most certainly; but it is absolutely necessary that we should take this gentleman into our confidence. Let me introduce you to Signor Stein—Herr Stein, I believe, I should say—the greatest financier we have in Naples. When it comes to raising such a sum as, I fear, you will

require, it is absolutely necessary to have his assistance. Now, Captain Hammerton, we will proceed to business. You want a big sum of money, and, under the circumstances, you want it as quickly as may be. The first question is, briefly, how much must we endeavour to find?"

"Thirty thousand pounds English," replied Hammerton, curtly; "and it's no use thinking of a reduction of terms. We've tried all that. Patroceni has got us, like rats, in his trap. He knows we can find that, and he means to have it before he releases Sir Jasper and the others."

"Thirty thousand pounds!" gasped Toldi.

"Thirty thousand pounds!" shrieked Kratz. "The bandit! The brigand! The extortioner! Thirty thousand pounds! That villain Count will leave you all paupers, as he left me."

"Thirty thousand pounds," muttered Leroux to himself. "A great man, this; a man worth playing against. The boldness of the conception shows the greatness of the intelligence. The old man there was right; this is no ordinary robber, but a very king of bandits!"

"It sounds a big sum," continued Hammerton, "but it is useless to waste time in discussing what is long past discussion. If you can't find this sum amongst you, tell me who else to go to. As for who Sir Jasper Eversley is, go to the British Consul, and he will satisfy you that he could find four times that amount in extremity; but remember every day—nay, every hour—is precious. Pay for money raised off-hand in this manner we must. We are in your hands, gentlemen. I can only pray you to be moderate in your demands. What does the Signor Stein say?"

"Might I ask the exact position of this gentleman's camp?" inquired Leroux, suavely.

"No," rejoined Hammerton, sharply; "I am pledged to give no information on that point to any one, and there are five lives dependent upon my silence. What matters it to you where my friends are in durance? Can you, and will you, assist to find this money?"

"I apologise, signor, for my indiscretion," replied Leroux, rising. "I will leave you to talk matters over with the Signors Toldi and Kratz, whom I feel quite sure may assure you that the sum you require will be forthcoming." And so saying, Leroux shook hands with the partners, and, with a low reverence to Hammerton, left the room.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DISCOVERY.

The low twittering of the birds breaks the stillness of the camp as the first streaks of dawn appear above the trees heralding the rapidly approaching day. If the birds deem it time to bestir themselves it apparently strikes nobody else that there is any necessity for it. One or two of the brigands rolled themselves closer in their cloaks as they became conscious of the chilliness of daybreak. The sun rose higher and higher in the heavens, and still the inmates of the camp showed no disposition to arouse themselves. The gentlemen of the road, or, for the matter of that, the criminal classes of all nations, generally are wont to "lie in bed to digest their dreams"; and when you are used to it you can digest your dreams quite as comfortably on the grass in these southern climes. At length the stillness that rests upon the community is broken by a splendid groan, and the outraged Jackson sat up in his lair. That dreadfully discomposed old servitor was quite ready to declare that he had never closed an eye all night; that in no gentleman's family that ever he'd seen had he known a case of an upper servant being called upon to sleep out on a grass-plat as if he were a dog.

"I've got rheumatism in every bone," he grumbled, as he anxiously rubbed his arms and legs; "and to think how I kept a-filling his glass at Wrottsley. No more furrin'

counts for me. If there's one vice that's disgusting it's ingratitude, and to treat a man in my position in this way: if it wasn't that my bones ache so, I'd say it was all his ignorance. An English gentleman understands it. Lord, when he goes to stay at a country-house he knows the master of it is only second fiddle: it's the butler's the first violin; it's to him that he looks for all his little comforts; it's the butler humours all his little whims about wine, liqueurs, and sees he gets that glass of sherry before dinner, indispensable to his comfort. *Sleep!*" he ejaculated, "who could sleep, not knowing but what he'd find his windpipe slit before morning? Safe so far," he continued, passing his hand over his throat; "but with that murdering scoundrel with the bandaged head thirsting for our blood, who can say how many hours more life there is left for us?"

Old Jackson, in reality, had slept the sleep of the seven sleepers, and trumpeted through the night-hours like a fog-horn.

"No," he continued, "I can't be expected to keep such a terrible discovery to myself; it's more than any one man can carry on his mind. Mr. Glanfield is the only one of them that's got any gumption. I suppose I'd better take him into my confidence. If we ever *are* to come alive out of this nest of hornets, I suspect it's Thomas Jackson who will have to manage it."

He rose as he spoke, and walked across to where Glanfield was sleeping tranquilly, and, shaking him by the shoulder, said, in a thick mysterious whisper—

"Mr. Glanfield! Mr. Glanfield! I've got something terrible to tell you, sir,"

"If that's all you've got to tell, you might just as well have let me have my sleep out. Now, then, what is it?"

And then Jackson, in solemn tones, and with many starts and nervous glances from side to side, unfolded his version of the conversation he had overheard between Pietro and

Giovanni. Glanfield listened to him in silence, and, when he had finished, said quietly—

"You are one of the astutest men I know, Jackson. Perhaps there isn't a better judge of weights ever saw the Heath; but you beat me this time altogether. You don't know one word of Italian—Pietro and Giovanni speak nothing else. How the deuce did you know what they were talking about?"

"Mr. Glanfield," replied Jackson, with an air of ineffable disdain, "I saw it in their faces."

"I'll tell you what it is, Jackson; you're seeing a lot, you know. Strikes me you're professing to understand faces a long way ahead of the rest of us."

"Butlers always does, sir," replied old Jackson, pompously. "It's the practice they get, it's the always studying what a gentleman will take, does it."

"Oh, go away, you old fool," replied Glanfield; "our lives are in no manner of danger. Mr. Wheldrake must be half way to Naples by this; but if we are to die it is not Pietro or Giovanni will decide upon our fate; that question is in the hands of Count Patroceni."

Old Jackson deigned no reply—quite evident to him now that Mr. Glanfield was not to be relied upon, and that the preservation of the whole party lay upon his shoulders alone.

Sir Jasper and the ladies were astir betimes. Sleeping "under the greenwood tree" may be all very well when you are used to it; but, let the weather be balmy as it may, it is apt to produce restless nights in the first instance. Camp life is usually early, but on this occasion the visitors were afoot before their host.

"Good morning, Mr. Glanfield," exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton, as she and Maude issued from their hut. "I never slept better, I declare. Really, this picnicking in the mountains is quite pleasant."

"I don't know what you call pleasant," growled Sir Jasper. "The Count calls it an *al-fresco* hotel, and considering the bill it ought to be the very best in Europe. I am bound to say the table is tidy, as far as it goes, and, by Jove! so it ought to be!"

"Yes," rejoined Glanfield, slowly. "Patroceni's got us in a tight corner, and there's no getting out except at a heavy loss. Well, Sir Jasper, it's happened to us often enough racing. It's no use making wry faces because you find yourself in the hole."

"Yes, ma'am," said old Jackson, who, with a face about the length of Oxford Street, cut into the conversation. "Yes, ma'am, in the hole; and that's about where we shall find ourselves before twenty-four hours are past, as far as I can gather from these miscreants' conversation. May the grass grow lightly over our heads, as the poet says."

"Go away, you old croaker," rejoined Glanfield, sharply. "Don't pay any attention to him, Mrs. Fullerton. The old idiot has seen two of the band disputing and gesticulating, probably about some private quarrel of their own, and has jumped to the conclusion that they were discussing what they shall do with us."

"Where is Fred, Mr. Glanfield?" suddenly exclaimed Maude, gazing round with a troubled expression on her countenance.

"Hammerton? I don't know; I haven't seen him this morning. Here, Jackson, you know—you never closed an eye all night. What's become of Captain Hammerton? He slept not many yards from both of us. Did you see him get up?"

"No, Mr. Glanfield, I didn't, and that's the truth. I was so absorbed in keeping my eye ——"

"That will do; you were struck out of all events that required keeping your eyes open pretty early in life. I don't suppose Hammerton is far off; in fact, our friends here take deuced good care that we shall none of us be very far off."

"I wish I could see Fred!" exclaimed Maude; "I feel rather uneasy about him. You know you said yourself, Mr. Glanfield, you wouldn't take a hundred to one about his chance."

"*I* said so?" exclaimed Glanfield, for a moment completely puzzled; and then it flashed across him that he had told Hammerton that he thought it was those odds against his life—a brutal speech he was fain to admit now, but then it was made in his first hot wrath at the disclosure of the Captain's duplicity; but how had Maude come to know of this? It could only be from one source, Hammerton himself, and Glanfield's lip curled at the idea of any man who could play upon a woman's nerves by enlarging on the dangers of his situation. Othello won Desdemona's love by telling of the perils he had gone through: but Othello only descanted on the perils of the past, never hinting at those to come; and then it struck Glanfield that, whatever else he might be, Hammerton was no coward. He had some object in saying this to Maude, and what could that object be?

"You don't answer, Mr. Glanfield. Is it because something has happened to Fred, and you are afraid to tell me?"

"No; I assure you, to the best of my belief, Hammerton is all right. He was sleeping some thirty yards off me when I saw him last. It is merely that I have not seen him this morning; and if I said what you impute to me it was under provocation. He had done that which had made me very angry."

"You have no cause to be alarmed, Maude," said Sir Jasper. "Fred's not far off, unless, by-the-way, he started early this morning for Naples. By-the-way, Glanfield, who did you settle should go there?"

"No, uncle," cried Maude, "Fred is not gone to Naples. Mr. Wheldrake told me last night that he was to start for Naples at daybreak."

"Wheldrake!" exclaimed Sir Jasper; "what has he got to do with it? How came he here? You are raving, child."

"Yes; Mr. Wheldrake is, or rather was, here," said Glanfield, quietly. "Your daughter is not raving, Sir Jasper. Wheldrake is a prisoner like ourselves. At the Count's bidding we cast lots as to who should be set free to negotiate about the ransom; it fell upon Cyril, and I trust he is now half-way to Naples."

"I put myself in your hands, Glanfield, and I suppose you know best; but for a delicate mission, which must involve the handling of a very large sum of money, I should have hardly selected for my envoy a convicted cardsharper."

"Oh! father, father!" cried Maude, "Cyril is innocent, I swear."

"I'll pledge my life for Cyril's loyalty on this occasion," said Glanfield, sternly; "as I would for his innocence that night at Wrottsley."

"It only shows, Mr. Glanfield, that you are very much readier to pledge your life than can be deemed prudent."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton, "here comes that dreadful Count. Only to think that such a nice gentlemanly, agreeable man could be a bandit."

"Very gentlemanly," growled Sir Jasper. "We gave him the best we had at Wrottsley, and he strips us to the last feather the first time he has the opportunity. When that precious scoundrel does meet his deserts I'll come at considerable distance ——" and here Sir Jasper's speech was cut short by the approach of the Count.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," said Patroceni, with a low bow. "Mrs. Fullerton, Miss Eversley, I trust you slept well, though the accommodation, I regret, is rougher than you are accustomed to. Mr. Glanfield, a night in the open is nothing for a sportsman like yourself. Sir Jasper, they are preparing your breakfast. If our mountain air has done its duty I know you will do your duty. Try it."

As he finished, Patroceni's dark eyes roved inquiringly over the party.

"Thank you, Count," said Mrs. Fullerton, haughtily. "We slept very well, but we hardly dreamt that the hospitality of Wrottsley would be repaid in this fashion."

"Ah! life is full of changes, my dear madam. Every turn of the kaleidoscope presents a fresh and unexpected combination; but," continued Patroceni, "I don't see the Captain. I trust my dear friend Hammerton is not unwell."

"We have none of us seen him this morning," said Glanfield, drily.

"Curious," remarked the Count. "Here, one of you," he cried, raising his voice, and addressing a knot of two or three brigands, who were busy cooking by the edge of the plateau, "send Signor Sarini to me quickly."

There was a silence of some minutes. Imperturbable as the Count's manner invariably was, still there was that in it now which gave the impression that something had gone wrong. Metaphorically speaking, there was thunder in the air, and all looked anxiously as to what this summons of Sarini might portend.

It was evident that Patroceni was quite as unprepared for Hammerton's disappearance as the rest of them. The silence was broken at last by the appearance of Sarini, who limped slowly forward with the assistance of a stick. They could see that the Count expressed surprise at his lieutenant's crippled condition; and then a conversation passed between them so rapidly that Mrs. Fullerton, the only one of the party with a fair knowledge of Italian, was unable to follow it. At its termination, with a low bow, the Count begged they would excuse him as he had a little matter of business to attend to, and immediately strode across the plateau in the direction of the tents, which it must be borne in mind were pitched upon the opposite side to that on which the hut stood. He plunged into the first he came to. He reappeared at the end of three or four minutes and was followed by Cyril Wheldrake, the man they all thought half way to Naples.

"Wheldrake!" burst from Glanfield's lips; "something, I fear, has gone very much awry," he muttered, "or else he wouldn't be here."

Patroceni, followed by Wheldrake, once more rapidly approached them, and it was easy to see in the Count's eyes that expression which Pietro had dwelt upon. They gleamed with the angry light of an aroused tiger; the usual suave, half-mocking tones were changed into those of bitter sarcasm as he said—

"Sir Jasper, you would, I presume, insist upon being master in your own house. If a guest thought proper to overturn all your arrangements to gratify a whim of his own you would probably resent it. If you held his life at your disposal it is possible you might take steps to prevent his ever interfering with plans of yours for the future. These gentlemen"—and here Patroceni indicated Glanfield and Wheldrake—"have thought proper to meddle in my affairs. I am not to blame if their lives pay the penalty for that interference."

"It is all my doing. Glanfield had nothing to do with it—knew nothing of it. Mine the fault, be mine the expiation," said Wheldrake.

Maude stood with tear-gemmed eyes and quivering mouth listening to this bitter altercation; and even Mrs. Fullerton's laughing face, when she heard Patroceni's bitter menace of retribution, became overcast.

"Gallant and generous, Mr. Wheldrake, to the last," rejoined the Count, in clear, cutting tones. "Like many a better man, you will perchance die for interfering with things above your comprehension. You have thought proper to change places with Captain Hammerton. You have trusted the lives of those you hold most dear to you, let alone your own, to a scoundrel in whose hands I decline to place mine or my comrades. Are you really so credulous as to suppose that the lot-drawing was a mere matter of chance? Did you never hear of forcing a card? and do you

suppose that forcing a straw is a bit more difficult? This fool, Sir Jasper, for some inscrutable reason, has sent Captain Hammerton in his place, and launched two lives into eternity thereby. Do you suppose a man with a price upon his head is going to trust it to such an unscrupulous robber as we all know Hammerton to be?" he continued, turning to Wheldrake. "You know how he ruined you at Wrottsley; it was but the other night I showed you the trick of it."

Here his speech was interrupted by a slight gurgle, or hysterical sob, and Wheldrake was barely in time to catch Maude as she fell back insensible. Mrs. Fullerton also was in much too tearful a state to render assistance to her niece. That lady had grasped two facts during Patroceni's harangue, to wit, that she loved Glanfield dearly and that his life was in danger.

"You surely, Count Patroceni, would never dare ——"

"Dare! Let Sir Jasper ask the records of the police-bureau what Patroceni has dared. Tears!" he continued, scornfully, as the baronet pointed in mute appeal to his weeping sister and senseless daughter. "Tears! Ah, I have seen too many in my time to be much moved by them now. Women must weep in time of trouble: to do that and scrape lint is their destiny. Listen, Mr. Wheldrake: I was doing my best for you. Now, let the precious blackguard you have loosed upon me threaten my safety and I retreat into the mountains at once. I shall not further cumber myself with useless prisoners in a retreat. I shall leave two corpses behind me, and two women to wail over them. Sir Jasper will be *worth* carrying along with me."

"Coward!" said Wheldrake, "kill us if you will, but don't terrify our women beforehand."

"Let your trusted messenger but play the *rôle* he has done ever since I have known him, and you may consider yourselves doomed men," replied the Count, with a bitter sneer. "Patroceni has ever kept his word for good or for

evil. His time has not yet come, and those who cross him are sure to make a bad end of it."

"We can die if needs must, Count," replied Glanfield; "most Englishmen can. But there is many a turn-up in life, as you told us just now, and I've seen too many cracks whose victory was proclaimed at the half-distance die away to nothing before they reached the winning-post to funk yet. The cards haven't run very much in your favour through life, or you wouldn't have to take to the highways in the autumn of it."

The Count's eyes flashed for a minute and his lips quivered with suppressed wrath at Glanfield's sneer.

"Good, Mr. Glanfield! 'suppress a possible enemy' is a maxim men like myself should never forget. Any arrangements you or Mr. Wheldrake may wish to make for your lawyer's consideration you'd best attend to. Captain Hammerton is a liar and a traitor; and, if our lives are menaced, depend upon it you are on the threshold of the grave!" And after a satirical sweep of his sombrero to his prisoners the Count strode leisurely back to his own tent.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A STORMY OUTLOOK.

When Maude came to herself she was lying on her bed in the hut, with her aunt in a very tearful state hanging over her. Patroceni's bitter speech had been a revelation to her. In one moment it had flashed across her mind what she had done. Stung by Wheldrake's manner, she sternly repressed all display of affection towards him. In her anxiety to rescue her cousin from danger she had never counted at what cost it might be to Cyril. She saw it all now. To do her bidding, to ensure Hammerton's safety, he had sacrificed himself. It wanted no great judge of physiognomy to read

the Count's face. As Pietro said, his Excellency never gave way to wild outbreaks of wrath, but there was that intense concentration of passion that is much more dangerous than the most volcanic explosion. The iron that gleams so redly is after all not at the extreme heat of that which is white. There was a fierce vindictiveness in Patroceni's rage more to be dreaded than any wild outburst of storm and expletive, and Maude recognised this at once. That cool, cutting, merciless harangue had much more earnestness of purpose in it than the wild ravings of a man beside himself with passion. She had marked before she fainted the cruel eyes and unforgiving mouth; and, though ignorant of Patroceni's past history, she felt sure that he would be pitiless to those who crossed him. What had she done? She had perchance saved the life of her cousin, but to do that she had sacrificed the lives of her father, her lover, and Glanfield. And, after all, was her cousin really in danger? She knew that he had been guilty, from the Count's testimony, of much duplicity; had she been also his mere dupe in this matter? And then the girl in her misery turned her face to the wall and bitterly reproached herself for the part she had played.

Tears over the dropped stitches, weeping over our blunders, rueful retrospection of neglected opportunities, are the lot of most of us, but just now Maude felt overwhelmed with an attack of this nature.

"My dear child," exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton, in a voice that trembled not a little, "my dear child, pray, pray try and control yourself. I know you love Cyril—I know you will never cease to love him—and to find that his life is in such imminent danger is of course enough to prostrate you; but," said the widow, "do not think you are the only sufferer. I fear he has never said anything I ought not to tell you, it is very foolish, but—but I am very unhappy about Mr. Glanfield ——" and here Mrs. Fullerton broke down, began to whimper, and finally buried her head in the pillow

beside her niece. But Mrs. Fullerton's situation was nothing to Maude's. If she had just discovered that Jim Glanfield was master of her heart still she, at all events, had nothing to do with the situation in which he was placed. With Maude the case was different. But for her ill-timed interference Cyril Wheldrake would have been by this time a free man in the streets of Naples, and, hap what might to the rest of them, would have been out of reach of Patroceni's homicidal instincts. "Die! yes," thought the girl, "I suppose that will be the fate of all of us. The man's a mere human tiger, purring like a cat in the civilisation of Wrottsley, and exhibiting all the ferocity of his nature when we meet him in his home on the mountain-side. Yes," continued Maude in all the agony of her self-communion, "I have always been told these Italians have all the relentless ferocity of the 'cruel Roman race.'"

Patroceni had threatened Wheldrake and Glanfield with death. Ah! well; and the girl gave a positive sigh of relief as she murmured to herself, "If he once commences bloodshed he is not likely to spare the rest of us. They may commence with taking the lives of one or two, but I fancy in extremity these brigands invariably ensure strict silence on the part of all the prisoners within their hands. It is very hard to die in one's twenty-second year, but—" and here a half-smile flickered over her tear-stained visage —"it will not be so hard when he is gone. I don't think, if they take his life, that I shall care very much what becomes of mine. Don't talk to me, aunt," she continued aloud, "I know what I have done only too well. Fred has behaved shamefully. He fooled me into persuading Cyril Wheldrake to do what I never dreamt of: he induced me to believe that Fred's life was in danger. Thinking Cyril had influence with Count Patroceni I implored him to exercise that influence on Fred's behalf. Oh! aunt," sobbed the girl, "I little thought how my request was to be complied with. I was cruel to him, brutal to him. I was

not sure he cared any longer about me, and I was too anxious to show that I no longer cared anything about him. He promised me that if he could save Fred he would. He has done it—done it! given up his life at my bidding to save Fred Hammerton's. I am glad of course of my cousin's safety, but I love Cyril's little finger better than him."

"Don't fret over that, darling," said Mrs. Fullerton. "I cannot think that will make much difference. The Count in his first wrath may threaten to shoot us all; it's very bad taste on his part; calculated to upset the nerves of us poor weak women, and not altogether, perhaps, conducive to strengthen those of the men; but only think of it dispassionately, and one must feel sure that he will not do so. His object, of course, must be to obtain this enormous sum of money he has demanded for our ransom. Say what you will, interference with an Englishman in any part of Europe is rather an awkward business. To summarily dispose of any of us would destroy his negociations for our delivery for one thing, and must bring—dilatory though they be—the Neapolitan police about his ears for another. Take heart, Maude, and don't reproach yourself. Mr. Wheldrake is more to blame than you are. I will admit that I am prophecying after the event, but I do feel quite sure of this: that comply with Count Patroceni's terms we must, and also acquiesce in his managing the arrangement in his own way;" and then the two women kissed and sobbed and went to sleep in each others' arms. In the tent on the other side of the plateau a conversation of a somewhat similar sort was being carried on.

"Well, young man," said Jim Glanfield, as he seated himself on the bed and lit a cigar. "You have been and gone and done it! Here's Patroceni been laying himself out for a nice little game of thimble-rig, and here you go and kick the table over. What in Heaven's name induced you to change places with Hammerton last night?"

"You said yourself you wouldn't take a hundred to one

about his life, and Maude appealed to me to save him. I thought she loved him," replied Wheldrake.

"And you think so still?" said Glanfield, putting his glass in his eye.

"Yes, I do," replied Wheldrake, doggedly.

"By Jove, you *are* a fool," said Glanfield. "What the deuce do you want? Here's a young woman drops clean off her feet the minute she hears you're to be shot at daybreak or thereabouts. I can only say this: when they take to swooning about me on hearing I am in difficulties I may be conceited, but I shall put them down 'spoons.'"

"I don't know what to think. I did it for the best."

"You did a very fine, generous thing, Cyril. You have risked your life to save that of a scoundrel who conspired against you in the most dastardly way I ever heard of. It was like you; it was what most men who know Cyril Wheldrake well could imagine he would do. But, you dear old duffer, you've done it all under a misconception. You've done this for Maude's sake; jeopardised the life she values above all others to save one whom she only regards as a cousin she's been brought up with."

Wheldrake said nothing for a minute or two, then he gripped Glanfield's hand hard and said in a low voice, "It was worth risking one's life to know this. Are you quite sure of it, Jim?"

"Quite. I have the evidence of my own eyes for one thing, and Mrs. Fullerton's opinion on the subject for another. Now, old man, we must look at the situation. Our friend the Count is most unmistakeably riled at your ingenious change of ambassadors; still, if Hammerton acts fairly by us I don't suppose we are in much danger; but Patroceni had evidently no faith in his quondam ally, and, judging from what we know, upon my soul he's right."

"I can't believe Hammerton would play us false. We have more to fear from rash meddling on the part of the police.

"Perhaps so," rejoined Glanfield. "Still, I wish you had kept our interests in your hands. I have an idea it would have been better for some of us."

Mr. Glanfield's idea was destined to turn out by no means erroneous.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LEROUX HAS A GLASS WITH GIOVANNI.

When Pietro told Hammerton that they were moving Giovanni into Naples for better nursing and food than they could obtain for him in the mountains he said what he honestly believed to be the truth. Giovanni, brooding over his wrongs, at last culminated in one intense desire, namely, to be revenged upon Matteo at all hazards. One of those fierce, sullen, vindictive natures, that, amongst the Latin races, so often lends itself to violent and sudden outbreaks, the narrow brain warped and intensified by habitual intemperance,—a dangerous man this to have craving for your life, and reckless of the consequences of taking it. It has been well said that the man, regardless of his own, ever carries that other man's life in his hand who has fallen under his displeasure. History has proved it again and again. Henry of Navarre, the first Duke of Buckingham, and scores of others, fell easily under the hand of the assassin, taking no heed of himself.

Did Matteo but know it, there was never a life in the city of Naples in more extreme danger than his. Had he gauged the savage temperament of the besotted ruffian who so often drowned his reason at the expense of his cellars he would have hesitated to testify against him. It was true Patroceni stood no trifling amongst his followers, but for all that Giovanni's lapse from the paths of sobriety had entailed no evil consequences. Matteo, in the first flush of his righteous wrath, had perhaps made the very worst of his old comrade's

case in reporting it to his Excellency. But that Giovanni had survived the pitiless punishment meted out to him was sheer accident. The thickness of their skulls has saved many men's lives before now, as the density of their understandings has advanced many men in their way through life. A strong sense of humour, and a little cleverness, have marred many a promising career; while steady, decorous dulness has slowly brought its fortunate possessor to the upper rung of the ladder.

Giovanni, indeed, had thoroughly blinded his old friend Pietro. The latter had had his misgivings when Giovanni had uttered his threats and imprecations against the cause of his terrible punishment. But he showed all the cunning of these slow-witted men in attaining the object he had set his heart on. For some days he craved querulously for little luxuries that were beyond Pietro's compass to obtain for him up there in the mountains; and under this pretext Giovanni had attained the present goal of his desires, to wit, Naples. He was like the wounded cheetah, an animal that has no idea of abandoning the game because you score the first hit. "Wound the cheetah," say the Indian shikarees, "and you've got to see it out. If you don't kill him he means killing you." And it might perhaps have been better for Matteo if the Count had pulled the trigger of his pistol that morning instead of dealing that merciless blow with the butt of it.

Matteo, at the pavilion in the Villa del Reale, was attending to his duties as host, all eyes and ears as regarding any movement of the police—that he knew was his clear duty; whom his Excellency might send in to negotiate for the ransom he was as yet in ignorance about; possibly, indeed, they might not think it necessary to inform him whom the envoy was, and quick-witted Matteo knew well that the better their envoy was doing his work the less likely he was to hear of his presence in Naples. Now Matteo knew from experience that when the police got news of brigandage, and

meant taking action, their preparations were usually the talk of the city. After Naples had rung for some two or three days with rumours of what they would do, and where the outlaws were encamped, they usually departed with much parade to pounce upon their prey, only to discover that, thanks to timely warning, the brigands had taken *their* departure some hours before-hand; but on this occasion Matteo had got to reckon with an officer trained in the school of the Rue Jérusalem, instead of one of the old Neapolitan police-agents, to whom he was habituated. Leroux had not been brought up in a babbling school—it was more his custom to keep his left hand in ignorance of what his right was about. One of his axioms was that an agent of police should be all eyes and ears, but could hardly be too reticent in the use of his tongue; that his business was not to talk further than was necessary to encourage other people to do so, and that he ought to accustom himself to make mental notes of the most trivial occurrences that came under his notice. They might be of no consequence, but it was surprising how very slight a circumstance sometimes furnishes the clue to a great crime.

When Leroux got back to the bureau his first act was to hunt up Patroceni's record—plenty to be read about his Excellency in the police archives, his biography therein extending over thirty years, commencing with political offending when he was a boy of seventeen, and extending to the audacious brigandage of his latter days. Two or three things struck Leroux: firstly, that there had been very much less pains taken to bring the Count to justice for robbery than had been taken to punish him for his political opinions. Tampering with the purses and lives of the people was evidently matter of small importance in comparison with doubting the divine right of kings to have monopoly of that business, as well as the destinies of nations. Next, how well Patroceni was served, and what a very army of spies and devoted followers he must have! Such wondrous

audacity and evasion of consequences was only possible by the most accurate information as to the movements of his enemies. He recognised as he read that this man had iron nerves, great subtlety, and boundless resources; no common malefactor this, and one very difficult to encompass within the meshes of the law. It was clear that Patroceni in the kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies had been famous as Schinderhannes, the robber of the Rhine. Leroux's pulses bounded. This was to hunt high game! Count Patroceni was a man of higher mark than it had ever fallen to his lot to run down as yet. As he pored over the records Leroux was strengthened in his conclusion that it was no light task which lay before him. The capture of a man like the Count was attended by great difficulty and no little danger. Once let Leroux be suspected of such a design, and he knew that sharp eyes would watch his every movement. He felt that his adversary's system of espionnage was superior to his own, and moreover that his men were probably pretty well known to the Count, while those to whom the brigand-chief looked for information were perfectly unknown to him, Leroux. Not the man either, Patroceni, to stand the least upon trifles. The police-agent knew that—let it once be known that he devoted himself to hunting down the Count, he would be carrying his life in his hand. To do him justice that thought shot across his mind and was gone, and he was far more afraid of being outwitted than of any mere personal consequences. He sat for some time after he had finished reading, pondering how to begin the campaign. Any open advance on the bandits was, of course, quite out of the question. Leroux thoroughly understood that would lead simply to the death of their prisoners, but by no means to the apprehension of the bandits themselves. What he aimed at was only to be accomplished, he thought, by getting into communication with one of the band; it would be hazardous—very hazardous. When you begin to deal in treachery you are apt to cut your fingers. Leroux's experience told him

that in a gang of scoundrels some one or two were always to be suborned. But then again traitors of this description are not very trustworthy, and it is quite possible they might accept his bribes, and yet betray him to their chief. Nevertheless, Leroux had quite made up his mind that there was nothing to be done until he on his side could open communications of some sort with some of Patroceni's people, and how that was to be brought about he at present had no conception, unless to attempt it through Captain Hammerton; as yet Leroux could think of no other channel. Still, the police-agent did not despair on that account. It might take some few days, or it might take considerably longer, but he had no doubt that before long he should get hold of somebody connected with the brigands. It would be something even to know their number, exact position, &c., but Leroux looked to doing a good deal more than that.

Count Patroceni was doubtless possessed of wonderful information, and was well served; and among his many instruments there would surely be one with whom gold ranked higher than fealty to his master; and Leroux felt that, to bring such a man as Patroceni to justice, Government would be liberal in the matter of secret-service money. Having thus made up his mind, Leroux put on his hat and went out for a stroll to sharpen his wits, while he deliberated in what direction he was most likely to come across some emissary of the Count's. Smoking his cigar he wandered in the direction of the Villa del Reale, and seating himself on a bench gazed idly out over the bay.

He had not been there long when a poorly-dressed man hobbled up, and with an uncouth salutation sat down by his side. Leroux looked at the new comer, whose appearance was by no means prepossessing. His beard was of many days' growth, and his head was swathed in coloured handkerchiefs beneath his sombrero. The glittering eyes and haggard face betokened an attack of severe illness, as yet barely cast aside, whilst the man's tottering gait and rather

shaky hand were strong proofs of the severity of the seizure, be it what it might. Leroux took stock of his neighbour almost instinctively. It had become second nature with him to note keenly the personal appearance of any one he might be thrown across. He certainly had no particular object in doing so in the present instance, and yet chance was throwing into his hands the very instrument he was so anxious to come across.

After reckoning up his neighbour for some minutes, Leroux at last said, "You seem to have had a bad time of it lately, my friend. What's been the matter? For, unless your looks belie you, you've been on the borders of the other world."

"Yes," replied Giovanni, for it was he; "I've had a bad accident, which nearly killed me. I was pitched out of a cart on my head; but I am all right now, only weak, so weak. I only want fresh air and wine to restore my strength. Ah! wine that puts heart into a man."

Leroux gazed at him attentively. He wondered whether wine had had anything to do with that little accident.

"You live near Naples, I suppose?" he said at length.

"Yes; I've a small farm on the road to Amalfi."

The police-agent pricked up his ears—a small farmer on the road to Amalfi would be likely, he thought, to have a considerable knowledge of the brigands. He might not choose to admit any such knowledge, but from all he had read up that afternoon about the Count he felt pretty sure that all the country-side were more or less in collusion and communication with Patroceni. It was that which made the great difficulty of dealing with him. All these people were doubtless devoted to him, and would furnish him with either provisions or information to the extent of their ability. Decidedly this interesting stranger, with the bandaged head and aspect of general shabbiness, was worth cultivating. Hawk-eyed Leroux had already penetrated the weakness of his new acquaintance.

"You are right," he replied. "A cup of wine will do us both good. Come across to the pavilion there; the fellow sells good wine, and you shall help me through with a bottle of his best."

"Ah, signor," rejoined Giovanni, "I shall be only too happy. You will exeuse my wrapping myself well up; the sea-air strikes a little chilly to an invalid," and, suiting the action to the word, Giovanni muffled his cloak closely about him. It was not exactly that he feared Matteo would recognise him, but he thought upon the whole it was preferable he should not. He was not strong enough as yet to settle with Matteo, but he brooded over the day when that settlement should come with an intensity that boded no good to the innkeeper.

It was curious, but Leroux led the way to the identical table at which, under the influence of the wine, Giovanni had made those compromising revelations to Wheldrake which, reported to Patroceni, had brought down the Count's summary vengeance. In answer to Leroux's call, Matteo speedily appeared. He eyed the new comer curiously as he took the police-agent's order. It was not that there was anything in their appearance to arouse his suspicion, but he was naturally observant and watchful of strangers. He was one of the Count's most valuable auxiliaries. The man was born for a spy—lynx-eyed and crafty as a fox. He did not apparently take much notice of Giovanni, but for all that he had recognised him at a glance. It was more important, Matteo thought, to discover who was his companion. The innkeeper practised all the usual tricks of his trade to obtain a good look at Leroux. He flitted about dusting the table, sang the praises of his wine, desired to know of which vintage he should bring the signor a bottle, but the police-agent completely baffled his scrutiny. Matteo failed either to recognise his features or his voice. Now, the innkeeper had made it his business, amongst other things, to know all the Neapolitan police by sight, but with

the detective officers this was not so easy. They were rarely to be seen about, and it is more than doubtful whether he would have recognised Leroux even if he had not been disguised. As for Giovanni, if he had any sinister design, Matteo thought it would be best come at by taking no notice of him. Having brought the wine, he retired with a resolve to keep both his ears and eyes open, Leroux filled their glasses, and then remarked, carelessly,

"Farming, I should think, is poor work in that wild country you speak of?"

"Ah, signor, I only cultivate a small piece of ground, and graze a few goats on the hill-side."

"I wonder," said Leroux, in his assumed character of the old clerk, "that you are not afraid to live out there. All the city is talking of the terrible bandits that infest the road."

"What have such as I to fear from bandits, signor? It is only those with full pockets that are in any danger from them."

"This Count Patroceni seems a man of great notoriety in that way. I am told he has baffled the police for years. You have heard of him, doubtless?"

"I know nothing whatever about his Ex ——, about Count Patroceni, I mean," replied Giovanni, brusquely. And the bandit tossed off his glass, rose to his feet, and wished Leroux a blunt good morning.

"Well, I trust we shall meet again," said Leroux, quietly; "I often come and sit here in the mornings, but you are still weak from your accident, and are quite right not to overtire yourself. Take just one more glass of wine to see you on your way home—it won't hurt you."

For a moment the bandit paused irresolute, then stretching out his hand he took the glass Leroux proffered him, tossed it hastily off, and, muttering gruffly something to the effect that they should no doubt meet again, abruptly left the gardens. Leroux sat silent for some few minutes after

his guest had left him, and a slight smile of satisfaction played about his mouth. "That fellow knows Patroceni," he muttered to himself, "and the chances are is in constant communication with him and his brother scoundrels. A shy fish, and wants careful handling, no doubt; but if I mistake not I've already found a bait that he can't resist—a man seldom snatches at a glass of wine as he did at that last unless it is his besetting weakness," and with this Leroux made his way leisurely out of the gardens. As he disappeared Matteo came out of the house and proceeded to clear the table his guests had just left.

"A nice respectable old gentleman," he mused. "Now what on earth could have induced him to bestow a bottle of wine on such a rough customer as Giovanni. And," he continued, as he raised the bottle, "wonder of wonders! Giovanni has left a bottle unfinished. I don't understand it. I couldn't catch their conversation, but that old gentleman must have said something that rather disconcerted Giovanni, or he would never have left a glass or two in the flask."

And Matteo retired into the house to ponder over this phenomenon.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CHISEL HEARS OF HIS MASTER.

As Leroux walked back from the Villa del Reale an idea suddenly flashed across his mind, which he determined to at once put into execution. He would be present at the next meeting Hammerton had with Toldi and Kratz, and would insist that Chisel and Hammerton should thereat be brought together. One point he thought was decidedly to be cleared up by their meeting, namely, whether Wheldrake was in Patroceni's hands or not. Leroux had not been steadily cross-examining Chisel all these days for nothing. He had

come pretty well to the conclusion now that he had no hand in his master's disappearance, but that he really was attached to him, and anxious about his fate. Hammerton could settle the question of his being in Patroceni's hands, and, reticent though the Captain most prudently was with regard to the Count, his merry men, and their whereabouts, he could hardly have any objection to saying whether Wheldrake was really their prisoner. Messrs. Toldi and Kratz made not the slightest demur about complying with Leroux's wishes; the police might be subject to derision by the men who had taken to the mountains, but they were held in very considerable awe in Naples itself; and the bankers at once sent a line to Captain Hammerton expressing their desire to see him next morning; at the same time another missive informed Chisel that he would obtain positive information of his master's whereabouts if he could call upon Toldi and Kratz at ten o'clock the next day. At a quarter before the appointed hour Leroux was quietly announced under his adopted appellation of Herr Stein. The police-agent rapidly explained the action of his little drama.

"I am, as before, signors, Herr Stein, the eminent financier. I have come to confer with yourselves and Captain Hammerton about the means necessary for this ransom. All the details are your affair. This Signor Chisel is the faithful, trustworthy servant, who, having failed to hear anything concerning his master from either the police or the English Consul, has now come in despair to see if you can give him any tidings of the missing gentleman. He would at once recognise Captain Hammerton, and that is all we have to do with it. Captain Hammerton can certainly enlighten his mind on the one point as to whether Signor Wheldrake is a captive in the mountains. For my part, I should think he probably is. As an agent of police, I want evidence on the subject. I don't want to overstep my province, signors; but if it is not asking too much I may conclude you will find the ransom for these English?"

"Yes," cried Kratz, bitterly, "the money will be forthcoming—not too soon, not quite so soon as they think, though. A sum like this takes a deal of raising. Ah! my God, yes, and a deal of making. Ah! these brigands, they leave you lifeless or penniless in a few days. These English they are about to be shorn as I was before them. And do they think, after having lost their wool, that all is over? No, no; a big sum like that must be borrowed, and the usurers, too, must have their fling. And they shave, aye, shave very close. The Englishmen will be lean, very lean, by the time they see their fog-girt island again."

"You must not mind him," said Toldi in a low tone. "This incident has made him a little wild; it recalls too painfully the terrible fleecing he himself received from this Count Patroceni."

"The dear old gentleman seems to have profited by the lesson," thought Leroux. "He speaks as if his ideas of interest would be pretty extensive, and as if as far as possible he meant to stand in with brigandage in future."

"The ransom is a big sum," continued Signor Toldi; "and to raise an amount like that at short notice is always of course expensive. Given six weeks, or two or three months, and a man like Sir Jasper Eversley could always borrow it at a most moderate interest; but when it is a case of a few days you must come to the professional usurer. It's his business to find money at short notice, and it is equally part of his business to exact very high interest for doing so."

"Ten thousand thanks, Signor Toldi," interrupted Leroux, "but I don't want to intrude upon all these particulars. I only want the main fact that this money *will* be found for Sir Jasper. If there was no prospect of it we should feel it incumbent to do the best for him we could, you know."

"Pray, pray, Signor Leroux, do not interfere. Captain Hammerton assures me that the slightest movement on the part of the police will probably cost three or four lives."

"I am quite aware of that, and you may rely upon my

discretion," replied the police-agent; "but, unless I am interfered with by my superiors, I mean to have it out with Count Patroceni as soon as his prisoners are out of his hands. It was at one of our stations in Algeria that they had to cope with this sort of thing. They rigidly exacted two lives for one, and the brigands very soon got tired of the game. As long as it is attended with immunity it is too profitable a calling to abandon. But all malefactors are wondrous chary of risking their own lives."

Here Leroux's lecture on the best method of dealing with the criminal classes was interrupted by the entrance of a clerk, who ushered Chisel into the room.

"Pray be seated," said Signor Toldi, in fairly good English. "You're anxiously seeking news of your master, I'm told. We're expecting a gentleman every moment who we've some reason to think will be able to furnish you with some information about him."

"Thank you, sir," replied Chisel, and then a silence fell upon the whole party.

Signor Toldi had nothing to say, for one thing, and was not given to speaking English except of necessity. As for Leroux, he was habitually taciturn, and was curiously awaiting the result of the little drama he had prepared. A few minutes, during which the ticking of the clock over the bankers' table became painfully audible, and then the door opened, and Hammerton appeared. Leroux had no doubt now about the truth of Chisel's statement; for the latter sprang from his chair, with more astonishment than any one had ever yet seen in the face of the self-possessed valet, and exclaimed—

"Captain Hammerton!"

But the Captain seemed by no means pleased at the recognition. He turned sharply towards Signor Toldi, and said angrily—

"I told you yesterday that it was of the greatest consequence my mission in Naples should be kept as quiet as

possible; I have carefully avoided showing myself about the place, and yet you allow me to meet a man who, of course, knows me well."

"He is very anxious to get news of his master," replied the banker, gently. He felt conscious that Chisel's being there was rather a breach of faith; but he could not tell Hammerton that it was so arranged at the dictates of the Neapolitan police. Hammerton turned quickly to Chisel and said—

"Listen. You're a sharp fellow, and, I believe, attached to your master. He is safe and sound in the hands of the brigands, along with Sir Jasper and his daughter, Mrs. Fullerton, Mr. Glanfield, and your old friend Jackson. They have sent me here to obtain money for their release; but, bear in mind, any babbling on your part may set the police in motion, and the result of that will most likely be that your master, with the others, will be shot right off. Forget you've even seen me, and, above everything, not a word to the police."

Chisel was aghast. He had pestered the police for over a week to discover some traces of Wheldrake. He had all the natural disposition of the ordinary Englishman to appeal to those functionaries immediately he found himself in difficulties; and, though he had formed a rather contemptuous estimate of the abilities of the Italian gendarmerie, still it was a revelation to him that their interference could lead to such disastrous results as Hammerton pictured.

"I can hold my tongue, Captain Hammerton, and, as I've no doubt you know what is best to be done, I will from this hour; but it is only fair to tell you, sir, that I've been to them several times to see if they had any tidings of my master."

"You had no idea then," said Hammerton, quickly, "where he was?"

"Well, sir, I heard, as all Naples has heard, that your party had fallen into the hands of the brigands, and I did

suggest to the police that my master might have had the same mischance, but they rather pooh-poohed me, and seemed to think that very unlikely."

Well, you know the rights of things now. "You had better keep quite quiet at the hotel till your master rejoins you. That will do for the present."

"I trust I shall see my master soon," said Chisel. "Good-bye, sir, and many thanks for the information you have given me. You may thoroughly depend on my not talking."

"Yes; I think I can trust you. Good-bye; keep yourself to yourself. As soon as there is more news to be told about your master you will hear it from Signor Toldi. And now, gentlemen," continued Hammerton, as the door closed upon the valet, "I presume that you and Herr Stein have come to terms about the price of this money?"

"Ah! my good sir," replied Leroux, taking up the word without waiting for the banker, "the signors know that I have strained every nerve in my power to save this disgrace to our nation."

"Ah! never mind that," interposed Hammerton, roughly; "we don't mean to have such extras in the bill as Italian flag trailing in the dust, salvation of national honour, and all that sort of thing. This means an extra ten per cent. which we can't afford and don't want. I want to know right out *when* you can find me this money. 'He who gives quickly gives twice,' as the good books say, and he who gives quickly charges a good deal for doing it, my experience tells me; briefly, how much have we to pay for the use of this money for ninety days?"

"Ah! Captain, I think I had best leave you to discuss little details like this with mine excellent friends, Signors Toldi and Kratz. My views and theirs quite coincide; we are all anxious to extricate an English nobleman like Sir Jasper from his unpleasant position, and to save such a blot upon the name of the great Italian nation as this would be. It will cost money, but ah! money is of no consequence to

an English milord like Sir Jasper. Gentlemen, I do myself the honour to bid you a very good morning. I am sure, Captain Hammerton, you will find all arrangements made to your entire satisfaction," and so saying Leroux bowed himself out of the room, leaving Signor Toldi perfectly astounded at his stupendous assurance.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A CAMP REVEL.

Residence in the Count's retreat was not so monotonous to his enforced guests as might be supposed. Lovers are generally content when they can spend the bulk of the day in each other's society, and Wheldrake thought himself amply repaid for his sacrifice by the knowledge that Maude still loved him, and had never ceased to love him. Mrs. Fullerton was devoting her entire energies to the subjugation of Jim Glanfield; and a woman with a promising flirtation in hand is always tolerably contented with surrounding circumstances. As for Sir Jasper, if ever he felt time hang a little on his hands, he had nothing to do but to express his disbelief in Wheldrake's innocence, and then he had both the women about his ears. They were not only firmly convinced that he had never been guilty of foul play at Wrottsley, but, in their enthusiasm, went so far as to say they were quite sure he never *could* have been guilty of anything wrong. Was it likely that a man who had risked his own life to save that of one of his traducers would stoop to such pitiful conduct? It was sublime; it was heroic; it was a piece of splendid chivalry, such as one rarely saw in these degenerate days; and Sir Jasper usually had to retire discomfited from the flood of feminine eloquence he had brought down on himself. As Jim Glanfield remarked, who happened to be present on one of these occasions:

"Gad; when a woman does believe in a man, she don't do it by halves. Wheldrake did a very generous and plucky thing; but he is not quite a Curtius, you know."

But if there is one person severely exercised by this *al-fresco* life it is Mr. Jackson. Sir Jasper and the ladies had the two rooms in the hut, Wheldrake and Glanfield shared one of the two tents, Patroceni himself taking the other; but Jackson was left to lie down anywhere on the plateau he fancied. The old man groaned in the morning, for he had been accustomed to more luxurious lying, and the softest turf is wondrous hard when you are accustomed to a mattrass. Jackson, too, was one of those fine old English servants whose belief in feather-beds and unopened windows was still unshaken, and to be called upon night after night to take to the bare ground and the open air instead was trying to a man of his years. Foreign ways, foreign dishes, foreign hotels, and a foreign language had all been severe trials to the old man; now everything had culminated.

"This riff-raff," he muttered, "can't even be said to have ways; they have no regular time for meals, but eat any time, sleep anywhere, and speak a heathenish tongue that no educated man can understand. It's a dead waste of life living up here. Waste of life, indeed! Good heavens! what put that into my head?—waste of life, and us encircled by cut-throats, who would have no more scruple about knocking us on the head than they would a bullock! Don't suppose they have such a thing in this miserable country. I'd give a quarter's wages for a beefsteak and a jug of Wrottsley ale. Sleep! I never get any sleep. What's the use of this red wine of theirs to a man accustomed to take his malt regular? What with lying on the bare ground, and keeping an eye on this precious lot of scoundrels into whose hands we have fallen, I have well-nigh forgotten what a comfortable sleep is."

If the safety of the party depended upon old Jackson's

vigilance they were most decidedly in a bad way; whatever that faithful servitor might say about his sleeplessness, his nose at nights gave stentorial denial to; in short, if his hosts had shot him for interfering with their slumbers they might have pleaded justification for what they had done. Still Jackson was firmly convinced that he was watching the course of events with extreme vigilance. He would walk across and glare curiously at the cookery as if he detected poison in the broiling of a cutlet. He would listen to their conversation, look over their card-playing, watch the rapid gesticulations which they used in their speech to each other, and from all or any of these draw the most astounding deductions of their intentions with regard to himself and his companions. At present he was boiling over with a desire to find some one to whom he could confide his suspicions. Mr. Glanfield was of no use: he had tried him and pronounced him a gentleman deficient in gumption. There was Mr. Wheldrake, but then there was that matter of thirteen nines in the pack of cards which was not calculated to inspire confidence. Should he confide in his master? No; Sir Jasper clearly didn't understand these furriners or else he would never have given his best dry champagne to a robber-chief. There was Miss Maude, but she was too young.

It was not likely that the old butler would think otherwise of Miss Eversley; he had known her all her life, and under the circumstances old servants are very slow to recognise we have attained years of discretion, regarding us as children long after we are responsible for our actions in the eye of the law.

There was Mrs. Fullerton. "Nice lady is Mrs. Fullerton," said old Jackson to himself; "but flighty, flighty! They all are; there's a good deal of ginger-beer about women; they are all pop, effervescence, and froth, and, like that sparkling but frivolous liquid, they don't stick to you. What I want, in a desperate situation like this, is a real

port-wine man, and the trouble is there ain't one on the premises. Well, it isn't the first time the honour and safety of the family's been in the hands of the butler. Thomas Jackson, you'll do your duty until such times as help comes, or the murdering thieves make an end of you;" and then the old gentleman, in his enthusiastic pursuit of further information, tumbled over sleeping men, who cursed him with southern fervour, blundered in upon Wheldrake and Maude in the midst of one of those sunshiny passages of "love's young dream," or drew a complimentary "What does the old idiot want now?" from Glanfield, whom he had disturbed in a pleasant *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Fullerton. The whole scene was so utterly out of his province, so utterly foreign to any previous experience, that the old man might be said to live in a perpetual state of nightmare, firmly convinced that the safety of the entire party depended upon his coolness and decision, and that there was not one man of the entire band who was not hourly plotting their destruction. Glanfield and Wheldrake had many a discussion over the state of affairs. Wheldrake, basking in Maude's smiles, which, in defiance of her father, she persisted in shedding upon him, looked at things through roseate spectacles. He would not believe but what Hammerton would do his best for them.

"I tell you, Jim," he said for the twentieth time, "although I did it under a misconception, it was the best bit of luck that ever befell me. It has brought Maude and me together again, and that is all the world to me. Hammerton is, perhaps, just as well out of Patroceni's reach; and, in spite of all that is past, and all that he has made me suffer, I can afford to forget and forgive. You race a bit, Jim, and have seen plenty of play in your time; well, you know what I mean when I say I believe in my star against Hammerton's. I always beat him; I won his money to start with; I won, unwittingly it is true, the bride he had marked out for himself; he took the next trick; he took away my

character, he took away my affianced wife; pretty well a tie so far. When it comes to drawing the lots here, again I win; it was not fair, as we know now, but the juggling that was exercised against me at Wrottsley was exercised in my favour on the mountain-side. I throw that advantage away. I let him take my place. What's the result? I win back the bride I thought I'd lost. No; something tells me we shall all come safe out of this mess."

"It's all very well," replied Glanfield, "but when they once cut up rogues I never believe in them again. Yes; it has been a pretty match between you so far, but you look like winning in a canter now. Once out of this scrape, and if you don't marry Maude Eversley you will have thrown the race away."

"I think you may congratulate me, Jim. Hammerton ought not to be very long over his mission."

"Not if the beggar can run straight, but when they once turn tricky, as he's done, they always go around corners to get at anything. Hammerton is just rook enough to be unable to refrain from attempting to get a little the best of it. That's where our danger lies. He'll try to overreach Patroceni, and it will take a very much cleverer man than he is to do that."

"Nonsense, old fellow; he knows how much depends upon it. He would surely act loyally to us, at all events, in this matter. He must know what any trickery on his part might lead to."

"Yes, he knows, old man," replied Glanfield, as he pitched away the stump of his cigar. "They know they will be kicked out of a club, and lose all social caste, when they're troubled with his complaint. As I said before, he can't run straight. However, there is no use talking about it; I'm off to bed. But Fred Hammerton, in his anxiety to get the best of his fellow-creatures, will come some terrible cropper before he has done. Good night!"

Wheldrake paced up and down smoking his cigarette

between the tents and the hut. For some little time he had some idea, perhaps, of a light muslin dress fluttering out to join him in his walk. It had happened so the last two or three evenings, and very pleasant Wheldrake had found it, but he was not destined to be so gratified to-night. As he turned for about the twentieth time, still fondly hoping to see the flutter of Maude's robe in the moonlight, he was confronted by the portly person of old Jackson.

"They're agoing it, sir, they are. They're a-working of themselves up, they are—as hardened and perhaps as finished a set of blackguards as ever a respectable man set eyes on. But human nature, sir, is human nature, wherever you find it. The criminal classes at home, as is well known, sir, always wind themselves up for their iniquities, and that's just what they're doing. They've got a hamper of wine from somewhere or other, and they're a swillin' and a guzzlin' like wild beasts, they are. They haven't got a mug amongst them, much less a glass. They're passing the bottle, not from hand to hand like Christians, but from mouth to mouth, and there's two or three of them down there whose mouth seems to hold a quart, or thereabouts. At the rate they're goin' it won't take 'em long to be equal to doing our little job. Don't you think, sir, we'd better all retire into the hut and make the best fight we can of it?"

"No, no; I think you mistake, Jackson. These fellows I've no doubt are having a big drink, but I don't think they are likely to trouble themselves about us for the next two or three days at all events."

"Well, I hope you may be right, sir," replied Jackson. "If you can sleep under these circumstances you are much to be envied; as for me, I couldn't do it. This blessed grass-plat is not what you call a thing to make you drowsy. Then, sir, I'm accustomed to my supper, with a good pull at old ale and a glass of something hot and comfortable to top up with. These savages never offer one anything to eat after sundown."

"What! they didn't ask you to join their party, Jackson?" said Wheldrake, much amused.

"It's not very likely, sir," replied Jackson, drawing himself up, "that I'd sit down with the likes of them. The juniors is pretty vulgar when we first get 'em, as a rule, but, dash me! I never saw them take to drinking out of a bottle."

"Now, Jackson, I wish you good night," replied Wheldrake. "I'll guarantee you come to no grief this night."

"It's all very well, Mr. Wheldrake, but, if you think you can calculate upon what a lot of wild beasts like these will do when the drink's in 'em, I can only say you and I ain't of the same opinion. Good night, sir, and may we all be alive to-morrow morning!" After which cheerful refrain the hardly-tried Jackson proceeded to prowl about the plateau for an eligible place on which to stretch the big horse-rug he carried over his arm.

The feast to which the old butler foresaw such a sanguinary termination was no phantom of his brain. Pietro had received from Naples only that afternoon a very comfortable hamper of wine, and had invited his more immediate cronies to make merry with him. No dalliers with their liquor these—no sippers, no dilatory drinkers who quaffed their wine from pitiful glasses; but men who drank deep draughts of the blood-red wine, and thought the mouth of a bottle sweeter to kiss than that of a woman. Little recked they of Jackson and his misgivings. Little heeded they of their captives or thought about what was to come to them. They were engrossed with their pastime, and, when the last flask was finished, slept where they had fallen on the field of battle, as men with the proud consciousness of having done their duty. And when Jackson, after another *sleepless* night, woke with a start such as a startled horse might give, he found the nasal symphony played by his anticipated murderers well nigh drowned the sweet concert of the birds.

CHAPTER XXXV.

NEWS FROM NAPLES.

During the next few days neither Sir Jasper nor any of his party saw anything of the Count. He was still in the camp, they knew, as they caught an occasional glimpse of him, although he avoided coming near them. No restriction was placed upon their actions within certain limits; but beyond this, it was sternly intimated to them by Sarini, they were not permitted to go, and that any attempt to overstep such limits would be at their own risk. That the Count was in communication with Naples both Wheldrake and Glanfield felt pretty certain. They noticed that messengers both came and went, and it was fair to presume that Patroceni had emissaries of his own in the city, who were vigilantly watching both the movements of Hammerton and the police. About these latter the Count had certainly as yet no cause to disturb himself. They had made no sign whatever, and the English Consul had been loud in his remonstrances about their apparent apathy. The captives knew nothing; but then there was little to know. Still Sir Jasper did think that Patroceni might at all events have let them know how the negotiations progressed. He fumed and fidgeted a good deal. His daughter was carrying on a love-affair, of which he had strongly expressed his disapproval, under his very nose. He could not take her away; he could not send Wheldrake away; and it was impossible to prevent the lovers being continually together. He could not be constantly reminding Wheldrake that he had not cleared the stain from his name in his (Sir Jasper's) opinion. Glanfield might think so; but then Glanfield, despite the evidence of his own eyes, had refused to believe in the evidence of his friend's guilt in the first instance. The sole proof of his innocence rested on the word of an unscrupulous adventurer, who had shown them pretty conclusively that

he was no stickler at trifles. Well, there was one consolation: his girl and Cyril could not be married up here on the mountain-side, and surely Maude would scarcely give her hand to a man in direct opposition to her father's wishes. Still after the first day or two, when the novelty of the situation had worn off, when the terms of the ransom had been all fixed and there was nothing to do but to await the delivery of the stipulated sum, Sir Jasper felt distinctly bored. The discovery that Wheldrake and Hammerton had changed places had given a temporary fillip to things, insomuch as Patroceni had seemed disposed to resent such tampering with his arrangements in ruthless fashion. There had been an imminent prospect of death coming to two of the party at short notice. Men don't feel the hours roll slowly by when they fancy their comrades have but few of those hours left to live.

But now the storm had blown over, the whole thing was reduced to the wearisome monotony of a prison—in fact, so bored was the baronet, and so disgusted at the way the remainder of the party had paired off, that he could have found it almost in his heart to sit down to cribbage with his butler.

Jackson soon discovered that his master listened more patiently to him than did any one else, and the reason was not hard to see—he was pretty nearly the only person Sir Jasper had to talk to. Wheldrake, under the circumstances, naturally gave him a wide berth. One cannot talk comfortably with a man whom one knows regards one as a cardsharper, and that feeling the baronet never could keep out of his discourse with either Glanfield, his daughter, or his sister; and as they all were strong in the opposite opinion conversation with them invariably ended in acrimony.

The baronet, therefore, listened with considerable amusement to Jackson's account of the bandits' revel of the previous night.

"I'll tell you what, Jackson: men who pass the bottle as

freely as our friends there do, according to your account, can't be very good guards. Why, I should think there was nothing to prevent our walking out of the camp last night."

"That's just it, Sir Jasper," replied the old butler, looking furtively round. "There's the sentries, of course; but, though they don't make beasts of 'emselves, they are not above taking a goodish pull at what's going. If we could only induce them to take their nightcaps strong enough," continued Jackson, mysteriously, "why, Sir Jasper, I don't see much to prevent our all walking quietly back to Naples without paying our fares to the tune this furrin impostor proposes."

The baronet said nothing, but remained wrapped in thought for a few minutes. Men in their youth scatter money as a farmer sows seeds. This is popularly known as sowing their wild oats, and the garnering of that crop is a bitter harvest-home to most of them; but later on, when the folly and vanity is, or ought to be, shaken out of us; when we have learned how very much easier it is to spend a sovereign than to make one, we begin to feel some reverence for the science of accumulatiou, for a science it is, as is clearly shown by the pronounced failure of many who, either honestly or dishonestly, devote themselves to its pursuit. Now, Sir Jasper was as free-handed a man as ever lived. No one could accuse him of what Byron calls that "fine old gentlemanly vice of avarice"; but when it comes to a matter of saving thirty thousand pounds the most reckless man would take the matter into grave consideration. That a man like Jackson should think their escape perfectly feasible was very natural. He had never been in such a position before. He knew that about four hours' walking had sufficed to bring them from the place where they had been captives to the camp. He had a sort of foggy idea that once past the sentries nothing would be easier than to regain the high road to Naples, and once there they would be in safety. He forgot that they must be

between six and eight miles from the high road; that they had no conception whatever of the way; and that they would hardly be able, with such a determined pursuer as Patroceni on their track, to call themselves free men until they should find themselves within the suburbs of the city. But it did seem odd that these drawbacks did not immediately strike Sir Jasper, to say nothing of the vengeance that an attempt to escape would infallibly draw down on the heads of some of the party. It was perhaps not altogether the possibility of saving his thirty thousand pounds, but the terrible *ennui* produced by imprisonment and inactivity, that at length induced Sir Jasper to listen to Jackson's scheme. Still when he came to think over it the baronet began to have misgivings. Possible their escape—so he thought—for men, but he did not feel that the ladies were to be depended upon for a forced midnight march, and, of course, to depart without them was out of the question. If he could not quite get on with Glanfield just now in consequence of that little difference of opinion between them on the subject of Wheldrake's conduct at Wrottsley, still he had an immense belief in that gentleman's shrewdness and common sense, and, therefore, thought it as well to sound him at once on the subject. If they were to escape it must undoubtedly be all together; and, therefore, sooner or later it was incumbent upon him to take them all into his confidence. He began with Mr. Glanfield, who promptly rendered further confidences totally unnecessary. No sooner did Sir Jasper unfold Jackson's story to him and his (Sir Jasper's) own deductions as to what advantage might be taken of this deep revelry of their captors, than Mr. Glanfield cut him short with a very decided opinion on the subject.

"No go, Sir Jasper. They get pretty boozy every night, most of 'em, no doubt; but they're like those chaps on board ship—they seem to do it in watches. Lot number one on guard, lot number two getting drunk, lot number three

sleeping it off—those that get drunk have time to recover, and are all there when it is their turn to keep guard. Lord, Sir Jasper, if we *did* slip through their sentries (and it's a big *if*), we should be missed before we had been gone ten minutes, find ourselves totally lost in about the same length of time, one or two of us probably rolled over like rabbits before we got a mile from the camp, and the remainder back there again by the end of the half-hour. It's not good enough, baronet. You can't suppose I funk, but the minute we get out of sight of these sentries we are just like what the Americans call 'turned round' on the prairie—we don't know where to head for."

"No, you're right. I suppose it isn't worth it; we can't afford to chance women's lives, though I should think at the worst they would send *them* back to Naples."

"One would think so," replied Glanfield. "But about our illustrious selves don't you make any mistake, Sir Jasper. Things are all very quiescent now, but, should Hammerton bungle matters, our friend Patroceni will be a man of his word, and some of us will have seen the end of our tether. Dull work! but we've nothing to do but watch and wait."

That same afternoon Maude was strolling about the plateau talking to Wheldrake, and she also began to speculate on the probabilities of their release.

"How long do you think it will be," she asked, "before we hear of Fred, and what he is doing for us? I can quite understand that a large sum like this cannot be raised without some little delay, but still he might let us know that the matter is in hand."

"Hush, my darling," rejoined Wheldrake, as he threw a quick glance around; "I have had a line of news this morning. It is not from Hammerton, nor is it of much importance. Whether the Count or Sarini have seen it I don't know, but it is so guarded that the writer evidently thought it was very probable they would."

"Who is it from, and what does he say?" inquired Maude, eagerly.

"Well, it's from my servant Chisel, and I can thoroughly rely upon him in this scrape. How it has come to me I tell you honestly I don't exactly know. I can only say one of our precious hosts, named Pietro, gave it me, with many shrugs and winks, and polite hints that the postage had not been paid. Now we are in such a ticklish position that I am afraid to trust any one. My correspondent is, however, as cautious as myself. There was next to nothing in his note, and he does not even hint at an answer. All he said was this:—

'Sir,—I take advantage of a chance opportunity to let you know that I met Captain Hammerton at Messrs. Toldi and Kratz the other morning, and I believe all arrangements for your speedy return to Naples will be very shortly concluded.'

"Now," continued Wheldrake, "I call that real good news. It shows that everything is going on all right. That Chisel should have been able to get a letter to me at all is a sign that we are once more in communication with our friends. That he does not say any more is, in my eyes, a thorough guarantee of his being a very safe correspondent. That note, you see, compromises nobody, while a rash epistle, falling into Patroceni's hands, might aggravate our position to a very great extent. To put it mildly, our detention might be made very much more uncomfortable. If you were confined to the hut, and I was confined ——"

"Oh! Cyril, Cyril, don't talk in such a dreadful way."

"Yes, Maude, you're right. The days would be very long if we could no longer see one another."

"Ah! yes, sir; you ran away from me for some months, and all because you had no belief in my love. Don't you know that when a girl gives her heart to a man she will hear of nothing to his disparagement, much less believe it?

If you were found guilty of breaking every command in the Decalogue, you would find me still by your side. When a woman gives herself to a man, his honour becomes hers, and the world would hold her craven if she did not stand by him in his time of trouble."

"Yes, you were true to me when circumstances looked cruelly against me. What I have heard here has been quite sufficient to convince Glanfield, at all events, of my innocence: but your father, Maude, is still dogged in his disbelief, and he has, so far, justice on his side. I can disprove the charge made against me only on the evidence of the man who made it; and he, according to his own admission, has quarrelled with your cousin, and accuses him of having introduced the false cards into my note-case. This may absolve me before many men; but others, like your father, will say there is no smoke without fire. That Count Patroceni will probably say anything that suits him at the time; and that the play, probably all round, with the exception of Glanfield, was more scientific than straightforward."

"You don't mean to say, Cyril," cried Maude, with cheeks aflame and flashing eyes, "that anybody would dare *now* to say that you played unfairly that night at Wrottsley!"

"Only too many," replied Wheldrake, slowly. "I do not want to hurt your feelings by conjecture; but the real story of that business, the virtual clearing of my name, will not take place till I have discovered who the confederate was amongst the household. Somebody must have removed those false cards every morning from the table, and that somebody must have been perfectly aware who employed him to do so. It will be painful, very painful, but I have no alternative."

"I don't understand; how can clearing your good name be painful?" said the girl, looking up at him with a puzzled expression on her face.

"Can't you see, dearest, that, though I did not use false

cards, still there is no doubt they were used? I can only clear myself by fixing the guilt on somebody else."

"But why should you hesitate?" cried Maude; "it is your character against Patroceni's: and really I don't think that his character will be much damaged by a trifling crime of this nature being added to the list of his offences."

"You still do not quite understand me. I do not think Patroceni was the culprit."

"Why? Who else could it be? You surely do not suspect either Mr. Glanfield or Fred?"

"Certainly not Glanfield; but I am sorry to say when I establish my innocence it will be at your cousin's expense."

For a minute Maude was silent. Then she suddenly exclaimed—

"But you must do it. Such a monstrous injustice cannot be permitted as that you should bear the disgrace and odium of Fred's crime. I am grieved, dreadfully grieved, but the truth must be made evident, if possible."

"I must convince your father of my innocence," said Wheldrake; "and when we get back to England I don't think that will be difficult. I have heard a good deal of what went on in the house amidst the servants after I left. Old Jackson, it seems, held a species of inquiry on his own account. He is not quite the man to manage a thing of this sort. He told Glanfield that he had discovered the culprit, but could not make him confess. My impression is, Jackson simply thought he had discovered the culprit, that he put the saddle on the wrong horse, and accused some one who had nothing at all to do with it. I'll engage that Chisel my valet would very soon get to the bottom of the matter if, as I suspect, the confederate was a servant. When we get back to England I shall not be long before I convince Sir Jasper of my innocence."

"And that," said Maude, "will, I trust, not be very long now."

"No; judging by the note I read to you, Hammerton is doing his best for us, and everything bids fair to be speedily arranged; and now good night and pleasant dreams to you," and, with a warm embrace, the lovers parted.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FISH BITES.

Leroux was in the Villa del Reale the next day at noontide, with a view, if possible, of running across this unfortunate agriculturist, who pursued his industry on the mountain-side towards Amalfi—determined to turn that luckless husbandman inside out. Much information connected with Patroceni to be wrung out of this man, rightly taken, thinks Leroux. An invalid who considers he requires fresh air and strong wine ought not to be difficult to get to the bottom of. As Leroux expected, Giovanni was not long before he made his appearance. Not only were the gardens just such a lounge as a convalescent like Giovanni would thoroughly appreciate, but they contained two attractions which were to the bandit as the loadstone to the needle—Matteo and his wine. The latter had always a fatal fascination for Giovanni, while it did him good to watch his enemy, and brood over the vengeance he meditated as soon as his strength should be restored. At their next meeting he made no effort to conceal himself from Matteo, but promptly greeted that worthy, and told the same story to him that he had told to Pietro and his comrades in camp—that he had been near to death's door, and had come into Naples in search of better food than he could obtain in the mountains to help him to recover his strength. He affected to Matteo to be much weaker than he really was.

That crafty innkeeper by no means believed everything

his dear comrade told him. He knew perfectly well that his testimony had nearly cost Giovanni his life, and understood his character much too well to suppose that he did not cherish some feeling of resentment towards him on that account. When Giovanni made his appearance at the pavilion the next morning Matteo not only insisted on his having a glass of wine, but expressed his delight at seeing him about again. Curious though he was as to who Giovanni's companion of the previous day had been, he made no allusion to the fact of the bandit's presence. It had pleased Giovanni to take no notice of him, and Matteo tacitly ignored that he had recognised him. But, whilst they were still idly chatting, the elderly stranger once more made his appearance, and, seating himself at the table, greeted them courteously, and asked for a cup of coffee. No sooner had Matteo disappeared in search of it, than the mock Herr Stein remarked:—

"Ah! signor, an excellent man no doubt, the landlord, but his wines are of no pure vintage. I felt uncomfortable all day after our little imprudence of yesterday. You will, no doubt, think me fastidious, but I must tell you I am in the wine-trade myself, and know what tricks are played with the juice of the grape. In flash places like these landlords are made to pay so much for the privilege of selling it; they are rented so high, that it is only by much adulteration they can get a living out of it. It is at quiet little inns, in the less fashionable quarter of the town, that you must go for good wine."

Giovanni said nothing for two or three minutes; he was disappointed. He had looked, not only to meeting the stranger, but to that stranger repeating his conduct of yesterday. Giovanni dearly loved wine; but, as his pockets were generally destitute of coin, he still more highly appreciated it when he had nothing to pay for it. It was not Matteo's usual custom to regale his comrades free of expense when they happened to put in an appearance. He received

them quite on the footing of the general public, and expected them to pay for what they consumed; but this stranger, surely he was not going to take this same narrow-minded view; if he dealt in wine he should encourage men to drink it, and not simply call for coffee!

"One may taste a good deal worse before one tastes better," he growled at length. "Wealthy men like yourself may drink rich wines, but poor peasants like me must be content with the poorest stuff."

"You mistake, my friend, I am far from wealthy; I am but a clerk in a wine-merchant's house. One small advantage of my position is that I have the privilege of purchasing wine for my own consumption at a very cheap rate."

At this instant Matteo appeared with the coffee, and conversation between the pair ceased. It was a curious instance of instinct between the bandit-innkeeper and the police-agent. Neither had the slightest suspicion of what the other really was, and yet each experienced a singular distrust. Matteo was inquisitive as to who this elderly gentleman might be; still he was not only so by nature, but his connection with Patroceni had made it almost his business. Leroux on his part did not for one instant suspect Matteo of having any relations with the men of the mountain, but he thought him a prying, tattling landlord; and his reason for taking up the line he did on the subject of the wine was that he was anxious to obtain a quiet conversation with Giovanni far from the reach of Matteo's inquisitorial eyes and ears. He had, as before said, penetrated at their first interview Giovanni's weakness, and baited his trap accordingly. There was no wine to be had at his expense in the Villa del Reale, but Giovanni clearly understood that, if he chose to accompany that quiet elderly gentleman to one of those old-fashioned taverns he talked of, there would be wine, and probably better wine than he was accustomed to, set before him.

During the time that Matteo hovered about the table no

further conversation took place between his guests. The stranger sipped his coffee and smoked his cigarette in silence, which Giovanni made no effort to break. Suspicious as Matteo was, he began to think the meeting of yesterday must have been a mere chance between the pair; and, after inquiring whether there were any further orders, he once more retired into the pavilion. He had no sooner disappeared than Giovanni remarked: "One does not like to hurt the feelings of an old friend, signor—I have known Matteo here for some time. One is loth to tell him so, but, as you say, his wine is not up to the mark."

This had never occurred in the least to Giovanni, nor did it now. It was quite as good as he was accustomed to, but he was not going to neglect a chance. The strange gentleman should be afforded an opportunity of letting him taste a superior vintage if he chose.

Leroux was in no hurry to take the hint. He was much too clever to wound the susceptibilities of the tattling innkeeper by carrying off a customer.

"If we should meet about the gardens to-morrow, signor, I shall be happy to take your opinion of a different vintage," and with this Leroux finished his coffee, made a courteous bow, and took his departure.

Giovanni, although by no means quick-witted, had, like most of these low brutal natures, a considerable amount of cunning where his own interests were concerned. He was quite aware without further words that, if he chose to meet this affable old gentleman in some other part of the gardens to-morrow, an adjournment to some snug tavern and gratuitous wine would be the result.

It never occurred to him to ask why a stranger should be so anxious for his society. This, which would have at once struck the superior intelligence of Matteo, never entered his head. It was sufficient for him that he was to be supplied with the means of indulging in his favourite vice. Leroux had instinctively shown his judgment when he had elected to

defer the process of pumping his victim till he had got him from under the eye of the sharp proprietor of the pavilion. The next day found Giovanni in the gardens of the Villa del Reale at the same time. He had not to wander about far before he espied the wine-merchant's clerk, punctual to their unmentioned tryst. The old gentleman was seated on a bench a considerable distance from the pavilion, and apparently wrapt in reverie.

But for all that, his eye, keen as a hawk's, had seen Giovanni the moment he entered the grounds—some minutes, indeed, before that worthy had recognised him.

Leroux was a thorough artist. Giovanni, Matteo, or even the Count himself, adroit as the latter was in every description of disguise, would have opened their eyes wide to find that grey-haired, feeble old gentleman, with the silver-rimmed spectacles, was in reality an active man in his prime, and one of the smartest and most daring officers in the Neapolitan police. He welcomed Giovanni cordially, and expressed a hope that, after they had enjoyed the delicious air for half-an-hour or so, the signor would spare the time to try a flask of wine with him at a little tavern, which was quiet and where he was well known.

Could Giovanni spare the time? Could he NOT for any experiments of that nature? He was like that witty but short-lived journalist who was always in a hurry, and whose parting salutation was usually, "Can't stay any longer, my dear fellow. I have an important appointment to keep"—it was generally with a glass of brandy-and-water at the nearest refreshment bar. The bandit expressed his delight, and in a short time the pair adjourned to a quiet, sleepy little tavern unknown to Giovanni.

In obedience to the orders of his new friend, a bottle and glasses were speedily produced, and the stranger proceeded at once to become confidential. He informed the bandit that he was a German by birth, and that he had been for some

years in the house of so-and-so, naming at the same time some leading wine-merchants in the city. As Leroux conjectured, this conveyed no sort of information to Giovanni, who bought his wine at the nearest inn, and had no knowledge whatever of wholesale houses. Then the police-agent cunningly turned the conversation upon Giovanni's own pursuits; and, though he could make but little out of him at first, yet he ascertained quite enough to feel sure he was on the right track, and that Giovanni could tell him a good deal about Patroceni and his band did he but choose. So far he was very guarded. He stuck to his story that he lived by the cultivation of a small piece of land at the foot of the mountains, and the only admission Leroux was able to draw from him was that the brigands were not such bad people as they were represented to be, and often did a good turn to the peasantry and poor people.

But this was by no means destined to be their only meeting. Herr Stein took the air every morning in the Villa del Reale about midday, and there Giovanni met him for the next day or two with the utmost regularity; but by that the bandit had got quite affiliated to that sleepy little tavern on the outskirts of the city, and had taken, moreover, a strong fancy to this new hostelry. He found that he came across his friend Herr Stein quite as readily there as if he wandered up the gardens above the Bay.

It never crossed Giovanni's mind that, to a man employed in a house of business, his new acquaintance seemed to have his time pretty much at his own command. He simply voted Herr Stein a good old fellow, a man after his own heart, and an excellent judge of a lunch and a bottle of wine. He ate and drank daily now at the old gentleman's expense. Delicate, very, was the insidious flattery of Leroux, who declared, to an old dried-up townsman like himself, Giovanni's anecdotes and conversation, redolent of country air and the hillside, were like a bracing tonic. Curious, very,

this Herr Stein on the subject of brigandage, ever lost in admiration of the marvellous achievements of this famous Count Patroceni. It was singular with how many of his adventures Herr Stein seemed to be acquainted.

"It is true, my friend," he said, laughing, "that I get my anecdotes chiefly from gossip and the old newspapers. He has not been heard of for some little time, but this last exploit of his has set all the tongues in Naples wagging, and the stories of his past career appear to be endless. Odd you never heard them, for he must be a pretty near neighbour of yours when you are at home."

This, as it was intended, a little piqued Giovanni. The hot-tempered, wine-soddened ruffian chafed at being twitted with such complete ignorance concerning the hero of his own neighbourhood, for Herr Stein was ever careful to represent him quite in that light.

"I know more about him, perhaps, than you think for," he growled. "You'll keep it to yourself," he continued, looking cautiously round, "but I've even seen him, and experienced both good and evil turns at his hands."

"I thought he never maltreated such as you," rejoined Herr Stein. "I fancied half his wondrous achievements were due to the devotion of the peasantry, and the reverence they hold him in as a patriot."

"And you're right, signor, though it's but partially true," replied Giovanni, rather excitedly. "Fear has a good deal to say to it. There's not a man between here and Amalfi dare cross his Excellency. It were better for him to have quarrelled with the Government, the police, and the Church, than to have angered the Count."

"I wonder," said Herr Stein, musingly, "if you know any one, or could hear of any one, who could get a note delivered into that camp."

"You're not a bad sort, old gentleman, and, as you say, a cup of coffee and a thimbleful of brandy is just about the thing to wind up a lunch with. I'm not given to talking,

but it's just possible that, if I was convinced that there was no harm in it, I might manage that little matter for you."

"There's nothing like being above board," said Herr Stein; "I will tell you the whole story. Count Patroceni has got amongst his captives an English gentleman who deals with our house. That we know is the case, as do his bankers, the English Consul, anybody. The police have ascertained that fact. Well, he has a most attached servant in the city, who is frantic to communicate with his master. It is only a line; merely to say that every step possible is being taken for his release. I don't suppose you know it, but Patroceni has released one of his prisoners to come and treat for the ransom of the others. This Signor Wheldrake's servant only wishes to send his master a line to re-assure him."

"If I only knew there was no harm in it," said Giovanni, in doubtful tones.

Leroux saw the battle was won; he poured out another *petite verre* for his companion, and then said—

"Harm! There can be no harm. The note will be in your hands to read; it shall not be even closed. I will bring it you to-morrow. If you do not like it, *Pouf*, tear it up, and there's an end of the matter! Count Patroceni has named a certain sum as the price of his prisoners' release; there can't be much harm in letting them know their friends here are doing their best for them, and trust very shortly to obtain the money. These English, they have so much money. Now, they would give a good deal to any one who could get this simple note conveyed for them."

"I've a great mind to see what I can do for you," said Giovanni, in irresolute fashion. "There can be no trouble come of it, and it seems a pity not to have a share of the gold when it is flying about."

"I'll bring you the note to-morrow, and five gold pieces to pay for the postage," rejoined Leroux, quietly; "and what is more," he continued, "I will bring a basket of wine for you to send to any friend of yours."

"It's a bargain," said Giovanni; "meet me here at this time to-morrow."

This explains how Wheldrake received Chisel's note and how Pietro was able so royally to entertain his comrades.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE UNDERGROUND MAIL.

Leroux had attained his object; he had opened communication with the captives. That very afternoon he had found out Chisel and dictated that note. It could not be too simple, he thought; a note that if it fell into wrong hands should commit nobody. It would be well to feel his way cautiously before anything compromising passed between him and the brigands. But in all his experiences of the criminal classes he had rarely found much difficulty in persuading them to sell their comrades for gold. It required tact, doubtless; the bribe must be dangled before their eyes delicately in the first place. There is little harm, for instance, in smuggling a letter—more especially when you are well paid for doing so. Leroux read the contents of this note over to Giovanni next day, and then gave it to him unfastened.

"You can show it to anybody," he remarked; "and, if you think it can possibly work any harm to Count Patroceni or his men, do not deliver it. It is only natural that the friends of the prisoners here in Naples should want to let them know that every effort is being made for their release."

Giovanni said nothing for some few minutes, but his eyes sparkled at the sight of the gold and the basket of wine which Leroux handed him.

"There can't be any harm in that bit of a note," he said

at length. "I'll look it over again; but I think I can promise to get that forwarded for you."

The police-agent suppressed the smile that rose to his lips; it was as he had suspected; it was evident to him by Giovanni's manner that he could not read. He put the note away carefully in his pocket without looking at it. What was to prevent his examining it then and there? Simply his inability to understand it. Leroux had taken all this into his calculation. Now the question was—Had Giovanni any friend in Naples to whom he could venture to show it? The police-agent thought not. It was clear that Giovanni looked upon it that there was great risk in interfering with the brigands. It was probable that he would not wish any one to know that he held communication with them. Again Leroux was right; this was just his companion's dilemma. He could not read that note himself, nor, save Matteo, did he know any one in Naples that he could trust to tell him its contents. He was not very likely to make a confidant of Matteo in the present state of his feelings with regard to that worthy. All this Leroux had counted on before making his proposition. He guessed that the greater part of the brigands were ignorant peasants, neither able to read nor write. It would not do to risk it the first time, but let one or two harmless notes pass, and they would no longer care whether the communication was open or closed. In a few days Leroux thought there was every probability of obtaining the intelligence he wanted, namely, what were their numbers, what were their habits, what hour would be most suitable for surprising the camp, and, above all, how far did their scouts extend? He meant to be very cautious: but if ever there was a case in which Talleyrand's famous maxim required to be rigidly adhered to on the part of a police-agent it was now. "Above all, *point de zèle!*" To rescue Sir Jasper and his party and at the same time to capture his abductors was an operation so delicate and involving such risk that most men, in Leroux's place, would

have hesitated to attempt it. Let a life be sacrificed and there would be much outcry on the part of the English Government. Leroux quite understood what that meant. When a strong nation begins to bully a weaker one the latter casts eagerly about for a scapegoat. There was no doubt in Leroux's mind as to who would be the scapegoat in this case. Let him fail, and he would be held as responsible for any loss of life that might occur as Patroceni himself. But Leroux was of the stuff of which heroes are made, with nerves of iron and an ambition insatiable, two qualities which have gone far to make great generals or great rulers for the most part. The unsatisfied lust for territory, main stimulus of your great conquerors, from Alexander to Napoleon. Anyhow, Leroux had got his game in his own hands, for those with power to interfere in it were in complete ignorance of his manœuvres.

Hammerton all this while was strenuously endeavouring to bring matters to a conclusion, but the hurrying of the raising of money is a weary task, as many a bold bettor or reckless spendthrift has found to his cost. The anxiety to lend, even at the most exorbitant interest, is utterly incommensurate with the desire to borrow; and, though Hammerton, fretful and fidgety, did his best to hurry Messrs. Toldi and Kratz, yet these accommodating bankers declared such a sum as he wanted could not be collected under two or three weeks. He was honestly desirous of doing his best, but Hammerton had far too much experience not to know that, however unimpeachable your securities, thousands are not plucked like fruit in an orchard. In a small way he had seen plenty of this sort of thing in his time; and, chafe though he might at the delay, he was honestly convinced that the bankers were doing their best. It may be doubted whether time did not hang heavier on his hands than on those of the captives in the woods above Amalfi. There is not very much to do in Naples, and Hammerton thought it judicious to expose himself as little as

might be. What was to be the outcome of all this, as far as he was concerned, even when brought to a satisfactory conclusion? Maude was irretrievably lost to him, while he himself would stand denounced as a cardsharper before every club in London. True his denouncers might not be able quite to establish their case, but their asseverations would be quite strong enough to throw a taint about him impossible to tide over. A man's honour in those days—or nigh a score of years ago—was as easily tarnished as a looking-glass. We have changed all that and are changing it still more day by day. We don't make quite so much fuss about these trifles as of old, and it is possible to do on the racecourse or at the card-table things which would have once put the perpetrators out of court. It was not at all that he was reformed. There are vices that consume a man that once they have seized him in their grip he is helpless to struggle with, and none more so than this. Once the gambler has taken to "assisting fortune" he is as little likely to refrain as the opium-eater from the consumption of his favourite drug. Hammerton to some extent recognised this; he had lost all his money, forfeited his chances, and imbibed a fatal passion for play. "Why," he thought, "should he not utilise his knowledge?—why not practise those chicaneries that, used against himself in the neophyte days, had doubtless brought him to his ruin?" Still, on the subject of rescuing his uncle and his party, he was determined to do his best, and had the slightest inkling of M. Leroux's tortuous scheming fallen within his ken he would have opposed it tooth and nail—better judge of the gravity of the situation perhaps than the police-agent. The Captain had enjoyed the privilege of Patroceni's intimacy, and knew infinitely better than Leroux of what the Count was capable. And yet the archives of the bureau had told Leroux a good deal concerning his antagonist. But just as Hammerton would have sat down to confront the most *rusé écarté*-player in all Paris, so would the police-agent have

backed himself to outwit the most accomplished *escroc* in all Europe.

Leroux's scheme was so far a success. He speedily found himself in constant communication with the brigands. The little *déjeuner* with Giovanni at that sleepy old tavern in the suburbs had become almost a daily institution. The bandit asked nothing better. He approved of the cookery, he approved of the wine, and in the matter of that the police-agent was ever liberal. Postage was paid for with a lavish hand, and, as far as thick-witted Giovanni could see, the correspondence was perfectly harmless. Unluckily, that fact was precisely what was perplexing M. Leroux. His notes might be guarded, but they were nothing to the careful responses he received. They were all signed "Cyril Wheldrake"; but, as the police-agent said irritably to himself, "If ever there was a man who hesitated at doing something for freedom it is my correspondent. There is no getting the smallest bit of information out of him. What is the use of such a note as this?

'Thanks for yours. Glad to hear things are going on satisfactorily. Shall only be too delighted when all arrangements are complete; thoughtful of you to write.

'CYRIL WHELDRAKE.'"

"Now," thought the police-agent, "it has been rather waste of both money and time to get into communication with a man who has not more nerve than this. He must understand what I mean. He surely can guess that his friends from the outside are curious to know how things are going on in the camp. A man with an ounce of common sense could comprehend all this without putting me to the risk of asking such a question on paper."

Wheldrake was no fool. He could understand all this. He gave Chisel great credit for having succeeded in establishing this correspondence between them, but then he very naturally supposed that he was in communication with his

valet in Naples. Even had he known that it was the police who were prompting these epistles he would most decidedly have hesitated to furnish them with any information. The ransom might be stiff, but Wheldrake thoroughly comprehended that there was only one way out of the complication —namely, to pay the money. He knew well what he had risked by merely changing places with Hammerton. Glanfield and himself understood much more clearly than the others how near they had been to being shot off-hand. Sheer good-nature had a good deal to say to his sending even the very guarded replies that he did to Chisel's letters. M. Leroux was puzzled. It was all very well; with great difficulty and considerable expense he had set on foot an almost daily post between himself and the captives, but so far nothing could be more uninteresting than the correspondence. It might have been published in the journals, and Patroceni, his band, the whole country-side, and all the city left to make what they could of it, and the result would have been simply that Naples and Patroceni would know precisely what they did now. How was he to provoke this Signor Wheldrake into being more expansive in his communications? That was difficult. Leroux saw at once that his correspondent (though Chisel was the nominal writer) was a shrewd clear-headed man, who had no idea of compromising himself or his friends. Leroux quickly suspected, as was indeed the case, that Wheldrake would have infinitely have preferred that this correspondence had never been established. A terrible disappointment this to the police-agent. Time was everything, as he well knew, in this case; no information clearly to be got from Signor Wheldrake; and yet Leroux, thinking it over, came to the conclusion that neither his bribes of money or wine had been altogether thrown away. There was an increasing avidity on the part of Giovanni with regard to a surreptitious correspondence on which the postage ran to five gold pieces a letter. True, he had to share his spoil with his old comrade Pietro, but

that worthy too was greedy of gold; and, although by no means the drunken swine that Giovanni was, like most of those men of the mountains he regarded wine and gambling as the two great luxuries of life. Two of the gold pieces, accompanied by a basket affording the wherewithal for a revel, had completely won Pietro's adhesion to this unlicensed post. He had submitted the notes to a comrade, who, on the strength of having been a courier, and picked up a slight command of English expletives, professed to understand the language. He did to a very limited extent, and was perfectly right, when, after laboriously spelling them out, he pronounced Chisel's notes harmless, and so M. Leroux had established a willing agent at either end of the postal line he had set up.

But, if he had got nothing out of the correspondence, the police-agent had little doubt that in a very short time the greed of gold and the thirst for wine would put all he wanted to know entirely at his disposal. Like a Mephistopheles, whose business it is to trade on the infirmities of our nature, and armed with that great experience of criminal humanity which his profession had taught him, Leroux was assured that the two deadliest baits to men of that type were already in their mouths—only to be speedily in their maws. Pike-fishers give their victims a measured time to gorge; and M. Leroux knew that he also must afford these luckless pike of his hooking some short grace to swallow the bait he so successfully dangled before their eyes past all repudiation.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MATTEO SCENTS TREASON.

Careful as Leroux had been to conceal his intimacy with Giovanni, he had aroused suspicion on the part of Matteo. The innkeeper, as has been before said, was prone that way.

The first thing that had attracted his attention was Giovanni's deviation from his usual habits. Unknown to that worthy he caught sight of him on the occasion when he had met Leroux in the Villa del Reale, previous to adjourning to that snug tavern, at which their meetings now habitually took place. That Giovanni should enter the gardens and not come for a glass of wine to the pavilion was remarkable. The bandit had few acquaintances in the city, and even fewer haunts. During his brief visits to Naples, a room in the slums of La Vicaria to sleep in, and the tables outside the pavilion at which to smoke and drink, were the two places between which Giovanni divided his time. Though Matteo had noticed him in the garden that morning, he had not seen him leave it in company with Leroux, and therefore his suspicions were not excited on that account. He thought that the bandit would shortly return to the mountains; but, wishing to learn something with regard to the negotiations for the release of the prisoners, he thought it worth while to make his way into La Vicaria one afternoon. He knew well where his comrades were in the habit of locating themselves on their visits to the city, and speedily ascertained that Giovanni had not yet returned to the camp.

This puzzled Matteo. He did not understand the man's lingering in Naples—it was quite foreign to his usual habits; on previous occasions Giovanni had usually been accompanied by some of his comrades, and not a day had passed but what he had seen them in the pavilion. Now the bandit was apparently alone, and never came near it. With what object had he come into the town, what was he doing, where did he spend his time, and above all what wine-shop did he frequent? It was a singular thing that it should never occur to so shrewd a man as Matteo that his old comrade might cherish feelings of extreme rancour with regard to himself. He never dreamt that the terrible punishment meted out by the Count was laid to his door. So omnipotent was Patroceni in Matteo's eyes that he would

have deemed it better to offend against all laws, human and divine, sooner than fail in his fidelity to the Count. That he should report everything to his chief was to him a matter past question; that Patroceni should deal out punishment to them all was a thing no more to be disputed than the decrees of Providence: he had merely done his duty to his chief and his comrades; and if Giovanni had paid hardly for his offending what had he to do with it? He felt as a soldier might who had simply done his duty in reporting the fault of a comrade, and never dreamt that comrade cherished the most bitter resentment against him for having done so. It would have been perhaps better for Matteo had that idea struck him. Though shrewd and crafty he was not gifted with either physical strength or personal courage; and, supreme contempt as he had for Giovanni's wits, yet he had much too great a respect for his thews and sinews to run the risk of a personal collision. It was from no anxiety on his own account, but as a sheer matter of curiosity, that Matteo set himself the task of ascertaining how Giovanni passed his time in Naples. He did not suspect him of treachery, that is, a premeditated treachery; but being a man naturally suspicious, and withal aware of Giovanni's infirmity, he might well feel a little uneasy at the thought of his comrade hanging about the city. It was but the other day he had betrayed too much to a stranger in his drunkenness; who was to ensure his not doing so again? And, thanks to their late exploits, the brigands were in a more risky situation than they had been then. Their presence in the immediate vicinity of the city was then unsuspected, now it was notorious.

But, to his amazement, Matteo discovered that this was not quite so easy. It was not that he anticipated any real difficulty, but he had fancied that the people at Giovanni's lodgings would be able to tell him where that gentleman spent his days. But they could tell him nothing. As a rule, when any of the band were in Naples, any of those affiliated

could find them without difficulty. Now, the lodging-house keeper could only say, "Surely, Signor Matteo, you must know, for he takes his meals with you as usual." I presume Matteo did not think it necessary to confide to the good lady that this was not the case; but he marvelled a good deal where it was that his old comrade did his eating and drinking. That it would be easy to what our French neighbours call "*filé*" Giovanni, Matteo had no doubt; but, then, that required time, and the innkeeper had his business to attend to. Still it had to be done; and, having ascertained from the good woman of the house about what hour Giovanni was accustomed to go out for his *déjeuner*, Matteo made up his mind to dog his footsteps the next day.

In accordance with this resolution, nearly an hour before the time at which Giovanni was wont to issue from his lair, Matteo was lounging in the street some little distance off, but keeping a keen eye on the door. No sooner did the bandit make his appearance than he followed him, and easily tracked him to the old tavern to which Leroux had introduced him. Having given his old comrade time to settle himself, Matteo made his way rather shyly to the door of the half-coffee-room, half-garden, in which the *habitués* of the place were wont to take their meals.

There is a freemasonry in all crafts, and Matteo was an innkeeper. It is rather a rule of the road with the better class of this profession not only to take no money, but to entertain each other somewhat liberally, when one of the trade crosses their threshold. Matteo certainly did not know the host of the "Golden Bush"—it was a retired house; but it was very possible that the landlord of the "Golden Bush" knew him. The pavilion was a tavern in the full blaze of day, standing in the big public gardens of Naples, and haunted by a very mixed *clientèle*. Visitors of all classes frequented the Villa del Reale, and sipped their coffee or drank their wine at the pavilion.

Matteo saw that Giovanni had seated himself in a corner

of the garden. A glance also showed him that he was known here; he would have liked to have stolen into the place, and watched Giovanni at his meal. But he was afraid of attracting the attention of the landlord. He by no means wished that Giovanni should see him; and, though he did not despair of evading his notice if left to himself, he was afraid that in a spirit of *camaraderie* the host of the "Golden Bush" might call attention to his presence. The man whom the king delights to honour is always the cynosure of all eyes, and in microscopic fashion the favoured guest of an hotel coffee-room always provokes much speculation amongst the other diners. He hesitated for a few minutes, and then finally resolved not to risk it—he would come there to-morrow, procure a table in the back-ground, and await the arrival of this renegade, who had deserted his wine-flasks. He turned on his heel and was going out when his attention was arrested by a courteous salutation, and he found himself bowing to the old gentleman who had made his appearance in the pavilion with Giovanni some few mornings ago.

Leroux had recognised him at a glance, and, though considerably put out at seeing him, was much too shrewd to ignore his presence. The two men passed with a bow, and each asked himself, "What the deuce had brought the other there?" Cunning and suspicious, Matteo felt no doubt that this old gentleman was there for the special purpose of meeting Giovanni. Now, what could be the meaning of that? Giovanni was hardly an object upon whom the most eccentric philanthropist would waste his money or advice. Matteo knew from former experience that the sharers of Giovanni's revels were usually destined to pay the reckoning. "A pig, a hog, a dolt like that!" murmured the innkeeper. "What motive can that old man have in letting him swill wine at his expense? For, though I've not actually seen it, I could stake my life that Giovanni is waiting there for this stranger to fill his insatiable throttle. The thick-skulled

sponge! no one would bathe him in wine except they hoped to get something out of him. Amusement? bah! Information? chit! He has none to give but on the one point, and surely that old gentleman cannot be interesting himself in the Count's affairs. No matter! I'll see to-morrow!"

Monsieur Leroux was every bit as much put out as the innkeeper of the Villa del Reale. He had no doubt whatever that Matteo had come to the "Golden Bush" designedly. Giovanni had acknowledged that he was an old acquaintance, and, as Leroux turned the subject over in his mind, it began to dawn upon him that this matter might also have some relation with the brigands. He had little doubt but that Patroceni had numbers of spies in Naples devoted to his interests. To get at the bulk of these would require more time than he could devote to it. He must strike hard and strike quickly, or it would be too late. Men with the halters round their necks resent any dallying about their release, and Leroux felt pretty sure that before many days that ransom would be paid; and, let Patroceni only once receive that money, his prisoners would be set free, and he and his band dispersed through the length and breadth of the land. Matteo was at the "Golden Bush" in good time the next day. He picked out a retired table in a far-away corner, boldly ordered his *déjeuner*, and, producing a newspaper, pretended to be immersed in its contents. But for all that never a soul that entered the tavern escaped his observation. He had not to wait very long before Giovanni appeared, and made his way to the table he had yesterday occupied with the air of an *habitué*. He took no notice of Matteo, but having seated himself was apparently awaiting the arrival of some friend before ordering his repast. The innkeeper had little doubt as to who that friend was, nor was he kept much longer in ignorance of the point. A very few minutes, and Leroux entered the room, and proceeded quietly across to Giovanni's table; but the man's eye was like a hawk's, and, though neither glance nor manner pro-

claimed it, he had taken in Matteo's presence before he had advanced six steps over the threshold of the room.

"Your old friend apparently takes a great interest in your welfare," said Leroux, quietly, as he seated himself at the table. "Well, that is nice; our old friends as a rule are apt to trouble their heads very little about what becomes of us."

"I don't understand you, signor. What on earth do you mean?"

"Mean!" retorted the police-agent. "Only that your friend—ah! I forget now what you call him; but our excellent host of the pavilion is breakfasting here. Had you not better ask him to join us?"

"What!" growled Giovanni, with evident perturbation of manner, "Matteo here! Where?"

"Keep quiet," said Leroux; "what is there surprising in that? The best innkeeper in the city may tire of his own wine at times, and long for a little change. It is only when you get to my age one becomes conservative and runs in grooves."

"Matteo here!" muttered the bandit; "where?"

"As I thought," said Leroux to himself. "Evidently one of Patroceni's auxiliaries. My friend here, I am afraid, is a little in awe of him. He is sitting over in that corner," he added, aloud; "hadn't you better go over and ask him to join us?"

"Matteo here! Santo Diavolo! Does he suppose I'll submit to his playing the spy upon me?"

"Tut, tut, signor! it is absurd to think anything of that sort; pray go across and ask your friend to join us. His presence here is, doubtless, a mere chance."

"He is afraid of this man's surveillance," muttered Leroux, as the brawny bandit rose from his chair and crossed the room to where Matteo was seated. "This innkeeper of the pavilion is, doubtless, one of Patroceni's most trusted agents. Quite as well I discovered this. I must

study this man closely. From the little I've seen of him I can fancy him one of the Count's shrewdest partisans. This was what made him hover round our table so in the Villa del Reale, and that is what makes my black-bearded friend so uncommonly uneasy now. A past-master this," thought Leroux, while his lip curled, "of whom the Signor Giovanni is much afraid."

But things apparently were not going quite amicably at Matteo's table. It was evident that Giovanni was using rough language, and equally transparent that Matteo was deprecating his wrath. The bandit indeed had roughly told his old comrade that he would submit to no dogging of his footsteps in this wise; that he was in Naples for his own convenience; that he was on no duty this time; and that it was nothing to Matteo, his Excellency, or any one else, how he passed his time. In vain the supple innkeeper deprecated his anger, and vowed that his appearance at the "Golden Bush" was the veriest of accidents. Giovanni's ire was not to be appeased, and the growling of the storm bid fair to attract the attention of the room, when Herr Stein glided across and poured oil on the troubled waters.

"You will come across, signor," he said, "and eat your meal with us, I am sure: it is better so, and this little matter of politics about which you appear to be differing can be amicably discussed over a glass of wine."

Giovanni stared at his new friend in blank amazement. Politics forsooth! it was no matter of politics that lay between him and Matteo. Men had persecuted each other on the Italian Peninsula pretty bitterly on that point, but it was a bigger difference than that which stood between him and Matteo. A personal vendetta, that, whatever the innkeeper might think about it, was only to be atoned for in Giovanni's thinking by blood; and, as if his scheming comrade had not wrought him bitter wrong enough, here was he once more playing the spy upon him in Naples.

Did Matteo suppose that he (Giovanni) was a mere child

under his pupilage? That he was to be watched, treated, and punished like a schoolboy? And then he ground his teeth as he thought to no schoolboy had punishment ever been meted out so cruel as his.

It was not altogether a pleasant party. Leroux exerting himself to the utmost, was the pleasant, talkative, elderly man of the world. Matteo, silky and subtle, did his very best to respond; but Giovanni, in his brooding sullenness, hung like a pall over his companions. He drank, and drank deeply, in gloomy silence. No sally of his companions could bring a smile to his swart, saturnine face. He was brooding over his wrongs and taking thought about the righting of them; and when a man in these southern countries dreams about righting his wrongs with his own right hand there is wont to be a vista of blood in the background of the picture.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

DEATH OF MATTEO.

It was early morning, the working world of Naples was just beginning to bestir itself, when two or three of those first afoot were disappointed at finding the pavilion not as yet opened. Matteo, too, was a man with the character of having his shutters down betimes. Rather a popular resort in which to get an early cup of coffee or glass of spirits. The early comers growled their disappointment, and proceeded in search of their needs elsewhere. But, as the sun rose higher in the heavens, the closed door and windows began to attract more attention. A house of call unexpectedly closed is sure to provoke notice, and the pavilion did a good deal of business in its way. Some of the would-be customers now drummed boldly on the door, and shouted loudly to Matteo to come forth and attend to their

requirements; but the innkeeper made no sign. Nothing but an impenetrable silence responded to their cries.

At this juncture the man who habitually assisted Matteo in the business made his appearance. Failing to get an answer to his shouts for admittance he went round the building to see if he could obtain admission at the back. But no! that door was as securely fastened as the front. The waiter explained that he lived at home with his family, and always returned to them in the evening, coming the first thing in the morning, and having his meals in the pavilion. It does not take much to excite the curiosity of one's fellow-creatures, and a perfect volley of questions was put to the waiter by the little knot now gathered about the building. He had wished Matteo "Good night" about ten; the innkeeper had told him not to fasten the front door, as, though all the guests had gone, he expected a visitor. The housekeeper, who slept in the upper rooms, had gone to bed some time before he left. It was very odd; neither Matteo nor the woman-servant were given to over-sleeping themselves; such a thing had never happened before in all his recollection, and he had been there for the last two years; he thought something must have happened. Had they not better break in the door?

That the door had better be broken in was carried unanimously, as it was sure to be. A curious crowd will invariably vote for the clearing up of a mystery; but when it came to who was to do it then the little knot were not so positive: each being apparently of the opinion that this was a duty that it behoved his neighbour to undertake rather than himself. There was much discussion on this point—dexterous appeals made to individual vanities on the subject: whereas it was pointed out to one that his physical strength would make the breaking of a door open an easy matter to him, so was it suggested to another that his well-known knowledge of locks indicated him as a fitting person to break down the barrier. But Matteo was known to have a will of his own;

he was known also to keep lethal weapons on the premises, and was likely to resent intrusion on his privacy somewhat sharply. Moreover, the authorities had strong opinions about breaking into houses in Naples. Then the little crowd jumped to a conclusion, as such assemblies are wont to do when wanting to see what is behind a locked door, but quite declining to take the responsibility of forcing the lock. It became necessary to fix that duty upon somebody. Clearly the waiter was the man, and shrilly the crowd clamoured that he should do his *devoir*.

But Carlo, the waiter in question, demurred; he pointed out that his master was a peremptory man who endured no nonsense; that when you forced a man's front door he was justified in the use of either pistol or poignard; that he valued his skin: that, moreover, his master might give him in charge to the police.

"The police! the police! That's it," shouted the mob. "You've hit it, my little man. Of course, it's their business. What are they for, but to look into matters like this? Send for the police! Fetch the police, somebody!" And then once more, with charming unanimity, the little knot of gossip-mongers cried out to the waiter to fetch the police.

Carlo, only too well pleased to be out of the affair in this fashion, was about to start, best pace, for the bureau, when the attention of all was arrested by a wild, melancholy wail that came from within the closed house. The men exchanged looks with each other. "Holy Virgin! What does it mean?" cried some, and then faces became awed, as men's do who feel themselves on the threshold of viewing a great tragedy.

Once again came that prolonged dolorous cry, and a slight shiver ran through the group as Antonio the locksmith murmured in awe-stricken tones, "*It's his dog.* There is death in the house, or the dumb creature would never send forth such a pitiful cry of dismay. Depend upon it, friends, Matteo will never loose cork for us more."

The howl of the dog and the exhortations of the bystanders lent a strong impetus to Carlo's feet, and he sped away for the bureau of police as fast as they could carry him. It was not likely the heads of the office were going to be bothered about the keeper of a second-class tavern not getting up in the morning. Bah! The man had probably taken more than was good for him overnight, and was simply sleeping off the fumes of it. If they were to be called upon to interfere about every one who chose to lie a-bed in Naples they would have enough to do. Still Carlo looked so frightened that, after grumbling a good deal, they finally despatched a gendarme with him.

Supported by this authority, Signor Antonio, the locksmith, speedily undertook to force the door. He had not much difficulty with the lock, but the door was another matter. He quickly ascertained that a heavy wooden bar—dropped, no doubt, into stanchions—prohibited entry as well. Of course, it was possible to cut a panel and withdraw this bar, but it would take time. Before doing so, Antonio suggested they should try some other ingress. Possible, for instance, that the back door, though locked, was not defended by bolts and bars. Antonio marched round at the head of the little company, and commenced operations on the rear of the premises. Here he was very soon successful, the lock quickly yielded to his efforts, and there were no further defences to hinder an entrance.

Accompanied by the gendarme and waiter, the locksmith entered the narrow passage, and gazed about him. The plan of the little house was simple in the extreme. Entering from the back on the right of the narrow passage which ran straight through it was the kitchen, and in front of that a small parlour, on the left a scullery, fronted again by a comfortable bar. Above the parlour was the guest-chamber. Over the bar was Matteo's own bedroom, while at the back on the upper story were a couple of small servants' rooms. There was an odour of crime in the air, when once again

came forth that dolorous howl from a room in the upper story. Three paces, and the locksmith started back, and with an exclamation of horror pointed to the foot of the stairs. Weltering in her blood across the two bottom steps lay Nita, the housekeeper, a powerful woman of thirty, but who, it was too palpable, would never dress macaroni or toss an omelette again. For the first time the gendarme, who had so far been stolidly phlegmatic in his movements, and evidently looked upon the whole affair as utterly beneath his notice, woke up and gave signs of animation. Turning rapidly round he sharply forbade further intrusion on the part of the crowd, who were following at his heels; he would have the locksmith, Carlo, and no other. Stooping down he roughly raised the woman's hand and convinced himself that she was dead. He then pushed on and peeped in at the bar. It had evidently never been closed for the night; the room was open, glasses stood about, and half-filled decanters. He next opened the door of the little parlour to the right, and there lay the body of the luckless Matteo, with his face beaten nearly out of all recognition. That Matteo had fought hard for his life was evident; the table was upturned, there was a *débris* of broken glass, and also a chair in like case, while the clots of blood with which the room was stained gave evidence of a dire struggle between Matteo and his murderer. That the innkeeper had neither physical courage nor strength has been already mentioned, but the old proverb of the "rat in the corner" may usually be counted on. Old men, and men by no means remarkable for courage, have died wondrous hard, very much to the astonishment of their murderers, before now.

Life is sweet and not parted with willingly, as a rule. The gendarme rose rapidly to the occasion; he was in the presence of a great crime, and was not going to bate one bit of his official importance under such circumstances. A discovery of this kind is as the find is to the fox-hunter. Everybody without exception was peremptorily ordered out of the house; and, having closed the door, the gendarme

quietly told Carlo to go back to the bureau as fast as he could, acquaint them there with what he had seen, and say that he (Pedrillo) had remained in charge of the building. The police-agent Leroux happened to be in the chief's office when this intelligence arrived. He left the questioning of Carlo to his superior, remaining himself taciturn as usual, but not a word escaped him, and already his active brain was piecing the puzzle together. He had made up his mind that Giovanni was at least in connection with the bandits; he and Matteo were evidently old friends, and he suspected in consequence that Matteo also was connected with them; that there was bad blood between the two men had been palpable at the "Golden Bush" the day before; that Giovanni had resented his comrade's appearance there; and, rightly or wrongly, attributed it to a desire to pry into his (Giovanni's) movements "Now," thought Leroux, "only let Signor Matteo have got it into his head that my burly, black-headed friend was coqueting with the police, and let him know that he thought so, and I can fancy in a combined fit of rage and terror his commiting just such a crime as this. These messieurs of the mountain side are pretty prompt and ruthless in their treatment of traitors, I've heard, and Giovanni would know. Let them but once think he even dreamt of betraying them, his life would not be safe outside Naples. He was a keen, shrewd man, that innkeeper; and, if my surmise is just, he let Giovanni know that he had some suspicion of the truth."

However, while Leroux is running all these things over in his mind, the chief of the police has elicited all Carlo has to tell, and, turning round to Leroux, suggests that he should go down and make a preliminary examination, to which of course Leroux at once assents.

When he arrives at the pavilion he finds it surrounded by a considerable crowd. The intelligence of the double murder has spread through the city, gathering size like a snowball as it rolled; a whole family has been murdered, and the numbers of that family progress in proportion to

the number of times the tale is told. People flocked to see the scene of the tragedy, although so far it consists in simply gazing at the outside walls of a closed house; for Pedrillo stands sentry at the one door that has been forced, and sternly refuses permission for even so much as a peep at the interior. Leroux says a few brief words to his followers, and the gendarmes, in obedience to his directions, form a cordon round the building. He then enters, followed only by Carlo and Pedrillo, whom he orders to stand perfectly still and to touch nothing. Leroux's first proceeding is to undo all the shutters with his own hand, carefully noticing the fastenings as he did so, to see if they had been tampered with. A question to Carlo confirms his idea that the back door was unbolted and unbarred when they forced its lock. No doubt the assassin or assassins entered that way, re-locking the door behind them when they had accomplished their hideous work. Leroux next enters the parlour: there he stands motionless, while his eyes rove rapidly round the room. He glances down at the dead man, and peers keenly into the battered countenance. Not quite an ordinary murder this, he thinks. Whoever slew this man bore him undying hate, hate so strong that he vented his rage on him after he had killed him. The innkeeper was dead when some of those blows were rained upon his mutilated face. The tables are all upset, and the glasses broken now; but there must have been a festive meeting before the wild beast flew at his prey. Signor Matteo could have little dreamt his life was in danger, or he would have never given spirits to such a man as Giovanni. It was the match to the gunpowder; it was letting the tiger taste blood.

Then he quietly left the room and closed the door behind him. He regarded the dead woman at the foot of the staircase narrowly. "No hate here," he muttered; "she has been slain with two strokes of a poignard. Ah! and, as I thought, here is the upturned candlestick. Killed, poor woman, because she at the sound of the disturbance was

rash enough to come downstairs and become a witness to the murder. Yes," he continued to himself, as he examined the passage, "here is the first splash of blood, and here is the candle. She came upon him just as he had slain Signor Matteo. He flew at her, struck her in the passage first, and then hunted her to the foot of the stairs, where he dealt the second blow, which killed her. It's all clear as noonday," thought the police-agent; "the poor creature was trying to escape upstairs when her fate overtook her." Leroux next went into the bar. He looked at the decanters and half-emptied glasses, and muttered to himself with a half-smile,

"My bandit friend doubtless manufactured himself a pretty stiff sedative before taking his departure;" and then the police-agent, being careful to move nothing, commenced a close and thorough search of the house. But he found nothing by which to trace the murderer. There was not a button, not a shred of clothes, nor anything by which to identify the assassin, left behind, and as far as the police-agent could ascertain no property had been taken from the house.

As he opened the servant's bedroom at the back of the house a small dog, evidently half-wild with fright, sprang back from the door and snarled at him in the madness of its terror. But no sooner were they well inside the attic than it made one sudden dart through them, and almost fell from the top to the bottom of the stairs in its agony to escape, The demented little thing made at once for the front door, which, as it knew, in the usual state of things, would be open by that time. Suddenly it stopped transfixed in front of the dead body of the servant. The ghastly scent of blood, and the presence of death, thoroughly upset the remainder of its bewildered ideas. It uttered one prolonged melancholy howl, and then, catching sight of the open back-door, fled through the portal like a mad creature—dumb witness concerning a murder about which there was none else to testify.

Leroux ordered the house to be again locked up, placed a guard over it, and walked back to the bureau to give orders about the usual legal preliminaries.

"I have very little doubt," he muttered to himself, "as to who the real criminal is, but there's not a particle of evidence against him: and, what is more, with a view to settling with messieurs les brigands *en bloc*, I require my decoy-duck to retain his liberty for a little longer."

CHAPTER XL.

AT THE GOLDEN BUSH.

There was perhaps no man in Naples so perturbed at Matteo's murder as Fred Hammerton. He had no doubt whatever about the innkeeper of the Villa del Reale's connection with Patroceni. As he listened to the accounts of the tragedy he became assured that this was an act of savage vengeance; and that it had been perpetrated at the instigation of the Count, and no doubt in consequence of suspected treachery on the part of Matteo. It may be remembered that Hammerton had recognised the unfortunate man, and hailed him when he had passed their carriage on the way to Amalfi. Hammerton had caught sight of him afterwards in the brigands' camp; and it was quite clear to him that the slain innkeeper had done them the honour that day to be their *avant courier*. He felt quite sure that it was Matteo who had given due notice of their speedy arrival at the foot of that forest-fringed hill where they had fallen into the hands of Patroceni. What had been this man's crime? What had called forth the fiat that had led to his doom? Hammerton's experience of these men of the mountain was extremely limited, and, like most of those whose misfortune it has been to make their acquaintance, he had no desire to

extend it. But he was under a strong impression that brigandage, like all other secret societies, lived in constant fear of betrayal, and consequently never neglected making a terrible example of an informer. About Matteo's individual fate Hammerton cared little; but the question was—If Patroceni feared treachery how would he treat the prisoners in his hands? He might connect him—Hammerton—with the dead man's bad faith. This might make the Count suspect that he was colleaguing with the police, and how he was to disprove this he did not know. He had never been near the police, and, to the best of his belief, they were unaware of his presence in Naples at this minute. He wondered what it was best for him to do. To seek for information from the bureau would probably be a fatal mistake. The Count had no doubt plenty of well-wishers in Naples who would speedily acquaint him should he (Hammerton) put himself into communication with the authorities. But then, on the other hand, how on earth was he now to send note or message to Patroceni? As yet there had been no call to do so: but it was to this very Matteo he had been told to apply when he felt that he had news worth the sending. This crime had unexpectedly cut him entirely off from the camp and its inmates. What would they all think of him up there in the woods? he muttered; what would Wheldrake think of him? what would Glanfield say of him? He had committed a treason at Wrottsley bad as he could be suspected of committing now, and had felt little compunction about it. Yet such was the curious kink in the man's mind that he shrank from the bare idea of playing the traitor here. Imperfectly as he understood Italian, still he had gathered enough from Pietro during his escape to know that Wheldrake—the man he had so bitterly injured—had probably risked his own life to save his. Sensualist, sybarite, and gambler as he was, Hammerton was touched by this, and he swore a big oath on his way to Naples to do the best he could according to his lights in this matter; yes,

even in case of the worst, to go back to the camp and to share in the fate of the rest of them. It was hard upon him; he had nothing to do with it; it was the sheer force of adverse circumstances. He had kept closely to himself since his arrival in the city, and been reticent and self-constrained in the extreme; and yet, though he did not know it, he was in communication with the police, and had indirectly contributed to the murder of Matteo.

Hammerton had a big smoke as he pondered over all this; but, for the life of him, he could see nothing to do at present but sit still and await the course of events.

Police-agent Leroux was quite as much put out in his calculations by this murder as the Captain. He similarly doubted whether his communication with the camp was not also cut off. Matteo, it is true, had nothing to say to the conveyance of his letters thereto; but the question was, whether this human tiger he employed had not, his passion satiated, fled back to his haunts on the mountain-side after the manner of his four-footed type upon the conclusion of a successful foray. He had no doubt whatever that Giovanni was the murderer, and he knew that men of that class, when their hands are red, are rather given to seek safety in flight. Leroux felt no doubt about laying his hands upon Giovanni whenever he wanted him; but at present his principal anxiety was that he should not leave Naples. The police-agent had hit upon a very crafty scheme for successfully surprising Patroceni; but it all depended upon his keeping touch with the camp, and without Giovanni's assistance he did not well know how this was to be done. Well! it was a problem soon solved. He had but to make up as Herr Stein, and drop in for his noon-day meal as usual at the "Golden Bush."

In spite of being harassed with numerous details concerning Matteo's murder he succeeded about the accustomed time in making his appearance at the quiet little tavern, and the first thing that met his view after entering was the burly

brigand sipping wine and munching bread while waiting for the repast he had ordered.

Giovanni stretched out his hand to Leroux in boisterous welcome. There was even a triumphant sparkle in his eyes, as those of a man to whom good luck has come.

"Ah, my friend," he exclaimed, "I am glad to see you this morning, for I've a famous appetite. We'll have a flask of the best to wash down the pigeons and macaroni that I have ordered."

"The brute finds killing a hungry occupation," thought Leroux, as he shook hands. "However, his nerves seem of iron, and he exhibits no tendency to fly the city, and that suits my purpose. Good morning!" he continued aloud, "I should have been here sooner, but I was so interested in this terrible murder that has been committed—a murder that concerns you in some measure."

"Concerns me?" growled Giovanni. "You don't suppose I had anything to do with it?"

Leroux glanced at him as a cat might at a mouse.

"Ah," he said carelessly, "you have heard of the tragedy, then?"

"Yes; I heard something about it," rejoined the bandit.

"There can be very little doubt about his guilt," thought Leroux. "A man who had just heard of the murder of an old friend would be full of the subject, and commence talking of it at once. No," he continued aloud, "I am not hinting that; but, as the unfortunate man was an old ally of yours, I thought you might have been painfully interested in his fate."

"We were old acquaintances, and had business relations," replied Giovanni, sulkily. "He sold bad liquor and charged me dear for it."

"A too common offence," replied Leroux, gravely, "not often meeting with such terrible punishment as it has in this case."

"Don't talk of it," rejoined Giovanni. "I heard some-

body he had wronged had beaten the fellow to death. I've no doubt he deserved it."

"A very singular crime!" observed the police-agent, musingly. "They tell me that the house is a perfect shambles. The assassin has killed not only Signor Matteo but his cook also, and so far there seems no conjecture, even, as to who he was or what was his motive."

"Ah!" said Giovanni, "they suspect no one, eh?"

"No one," answered Leroux. "What the police may think they will doubtless keep to themselves. By the way, I have another note that I want forwarded to the camp, just to say that the raising of the money is nearly completed. This gentleman who has been released is very anxious to let his friends know that."

Giovanni extended his hand for the letter, and glanced greedily at the gold pieces that accompanied it. For a moment they absorbed all his attention, but as he put the letter into his pocket he noticed that it was fastened.

"This is closed," he exclaimed. "What does that mean?" And as he asked the question he glanced suspiciously at the police-agent.

"Stupid of him!" replied Leroux, carelessly. "I told him always to send his letters open. You had better give me both that and the money back, and I will bring you another to-morrow; it is a pity, as the signor was very anxious to send off his news at once."

Giovanni hesitated; he was loth to part with the gold, and yet extremely anxious not to do anything that could do harm to his comrades. He sat playing with the money and turning the whole thing over in his mind, and at length it dawned upon him that after all he had known nothing of the contents of the previous notes he had forwarded beyond what Leroux had told him.

"I will do it," he said at last. "The contents are what you tell me?"

"What else should he have to write about?" inquired

Leroux, jesuitically, and gold and letter at once disappeared into the bandit's pocket.

Now, there was in that note what Leroux had stated; but when he asked what else could the signor have to say he knew very well that it also contained news of the murder.

Chisel had been very much surprised when Herr Stein had come to him in a great hurry that morning, and made him add to his usual report that things were progressing as favourably as possible these few lines:—"An innkeeper called Matteo, who kept the pavilion in the Villa del Reale, was brutally murdered last night." The police-agent thought that the captives should be furnished with this piece of intelligence, which might possibly be the cause of some menace to their lives. Police-agent Leroux was quite convinced that the crafty, subtle, innkeeper had been an agent of Patroceni's; and, from all he had ever heard of the Count, thought that he was just the man to avenge the death of one of his instruments. If the Count was only aware that the murder had been committed by one of his own people, then, of course, it was a matter amongst the bandits themselves, but there was nothing to show that.

Leroux at this time was under a like excitement that attends the sportsman in the middle of a big run. He had, as far as he could see, all the strings of the game in his hand; and, though he by no means overlooked the fact that he had a great man against him, and all the more dangerous because nothing had been heard of him lately, still he did think that he should checkmate Count Patroceni in the course of a few days. Chisel, who writes these notes, has no idea that they are dictated by the police; but is under the impression that they proceed from Herr Stein himself, who has pointed out to him that, as a great financial agent, he has several times had the arranging of these things, and so has his own way of communicating with the fraternity of the mountains. Thus it is always best to keep the captives

constantly informed that every nerve is being strained to procure the necessary money; it re-assures the brigands, and makes them feel that the authorities are not being invoked to their detriment. Leroux is planning a very daring *coup*, and at present he is not a little troubled as to whether Matteo's murder may affect his combinations. It has already made so much stir in the city that there can be little doubt of the intelligence very speedily reaching Patroceni's ears, and, as the police-agent shrewdly guessed, the loss of a trusted confederate in Naples might alter the Count's proceedings in many ways.

In spite of all his astuteness, Leroux had not got as much out of Giovanni as he expected. This was due partly to the police-agent's fears of pushing his questioning too far, and thereby scaring so shy a fish, and partly to Giovanni having had some reticence literally knocked into his head. The operation might have been severe, but it had undoubtedly been effectual, and Giovanni was now very guarded when speaking of the Count. Leroux was right in one conjecture—intelligence of the murder speedily reached the camp; but, beyond Pietro, no one had the slightest idea of the truth. As for the Count, he was not even aware that Giovanni was alive; he had never seen him since he struck him down, nor had he been told of his recovery. Pietro alone, of all the bandits, was aware of the revengeful feelings Giovanni had entertained towards the dead man.

CHAPTER LXI.

PATROCENI PUZZLED.

When Wheldrake got Chisel's note telling him of the murder he at once showed it to Glanfield, and the two commenced to talk the matter over.

"I don't see," he observed, "how this can affect our

business, but it may; this man I know is connected with the brigands—indeed, he had much to do with my own capture. As you know, I was kidnapped at his house; and I heard him give evidence before the Count as to a ruffian called Giovanni's drunkenness. It was to this Giovanni that I owe being made prisoner. In his cups I drew him out as to what Patroceni was; and the Count told me himself that I might thank my thirst for knowledge for bringing me here. I had learnt too much to be left at liberty."

"I can hardly say I have seen this innkeeper," replied Glanfield. "A horseman passed us on the road just before we fell in with our friends here, and Hammerton told me afterwards it was the proprietor of the pavilion. As for this Giovanni, I have never seen him at all."

"And are never likely to do so now," interposed Wheldrake. "Patroceni, as a punishment for his intoxication, dealt him a blow with the butt-end of his pistol that I should think sent him straight to the other world. At all events he was carried away for dead."

"Well," replied Glanfield, "we can't be suspected of having anything to do with it. It is a clear *alibi* for all of us except Hammerton; and, though I look upon him as quite capable of snatching at anything in the way of money, I don't think he is likely to go in for murdering an innkeeper. Some of that man Giovanni's relations, I should think, have settled an old score against Matteo. They would, doubtless, hear that he had caused the death of their interesting relation."

"Everything seems going on all right according to this," said Wheldrake, as he once more glanced at Chisel's note, "but they are excessively slow. I suppose Hammerton is really doing his best?"

"As I said before," rejoined Glanfield, "when they've once run rogues never stand them again, but I believe he is running straight this time. Remember, this is a country where they always take plenty of time to do everything. That raising money at very short notice means paying proportionately

long interest. I once heard a great financial agent accustomed to finding the means for many a black Monday, say—
—when two of his clients of the plunging-school had run a dead-heat, and, not content with the very heavy stakes they had had in the first go, backed their opinions again with renewed obstinacy,—I heard him say, on being appealed to as to which he thought would win the decider,—'Don't ask me; I shall have ten thousand to find on Monday whichever way it is, and that is enough for me to think about!'"

"A very instructive anecdote, Glanfield," said Sir Jasper, laughing, who had approached them unobserved just in time to catch this little illustration. "I recollect the case; and, if such an expert as you are alluding to thought there would be a difficulty in getting that sum in London for two such clients as his, we can't expect but that in Naples the difficulties of raising such a much larger amount will be very much greater. We have seen nothing of our host, Mr. Wheldrake, since you interfered with his arrangements."

This was a sort of extension of the olive-branch on Sir Jasper's part. He was willing to treat Wheldrake somewhat more cordially than he had done of late. The *gutta cavat lapidem* had gradually told upon Sir Jasper. His daughter, his sister, and Glanfield persistently affirmed Wheldrake's innocence; and, though he was not convinced, nor the least reconciled to the idea of any marriage between Maude and Wheldrake, still he wished for past times to be on a more friendly footing with the young man.

But Cyril had no idea of resuming relations with the baronet on that platform. He could not pretend to be on amicable terms with one who could entertain such a doubt of his honour as Sir Jasper made no scruple of admitting still possessed him, and his response was cold and measured.

"You do not approve of my tactics, Sir Jasper. I am sorry for it. Much more satisfactory to you, I should have thought, than the business resting in my hands."

The baronet immediately drew himself up. He was not

prepared to find his overtures so coldly responded to. His observation had been simply the prelude to more genial converse than had passed between them of late; but it was very possible for a proud man like Wheldrake to interpret it as a sarcastic gibe at his having interfered at all in the ordering of things.

"Our worthy friends here were on the drink again last night, so Jackson tells me," observed the baronet, quietly ignoring Wheldrake's reply. "I should think, like the Saxons, they would awake to their Hastings some fine morning. If the Neapolitan police had the slightest enterprise they would find very little difficulty in capturing these fellows."

"Then all I can say is it is devoutly to be hoped they will continue to want enterprise," said Glanfield. "I take it to capture Patroceni and our friends here is a cut above any man they have got amongst them. I fancy that these beggars would fight under the Count, and that moreover as a preliminary his Excellency would shoot the balance of his prisoners."

"What! supposing that an attack took place upon him from no breach of faith on our part?" said Sir Jasper.

"You see he would not have time to look into that. We should find ourselves in the forfeit list and struck out of all engagements."

"We must take our chance," said Sir Jasper. "But the carelessness of the look-out kept by these fellows absolutely invites a police-raid on the place. They might have Patroceni and all these fellows bound and trussed like turtles without firing a shot or losing a life."

"Now, baronet," said Glanfield, laughing, "I know where your inspiration comes from. I can see old Jackson's finger all through that idea. That blessed old idiot only sees one-half of the question. He sees a good many of these fellows swallow a lot of wine, and lie down to sleep. But they are a long way off the intoxicated state he imagines them in;

while their sentries, although they don't act like regular soldiers, have got their eyes pretty widely open. I've wandered about the camp at all hours, and know it. Take my word, if the police make a dash at our friends here, you'll see an uncommon pretty fight—that is, should the Count not resort to that preliminary measure I think probable."

Sir Jasper said nothing; he was so weary of inaction that had he not been hampered by his daughter and sister he would have urged a dash for freedom in the teeth of the cooler counsels of Jim Glanfield. "I suppose there is no further news from Naples?" he inquired at last.

"Yes; Wheldrake heard everything was going on all right this morning; but it is a tedious business."

Glanfield did not think it necessary to mention anything about Matteo's murder to the baronet. He had no knowledge of the innkeeper, and it would, therefore, interest him but little. Nor was it easy to see how it concerned any of them. Yet Wheldrake had seemed to think it might.

Here Maude and Mrs. Fullerton interrupted the conversation.

"We are discussing, Mr. Glanfield," said the vivacious widow, "the charms of this mountain residence; it was delightful at first,"—a savage grunt of dissent from Sir Jasper,—"but it is beginning to get a wee bit monotonous now. We pine for our maids, and I am sure you must all be as tired of our gowns as we are."

"The circumstances are trying, but I shall always stick to it that you are the best ——"

"No, Mr. Glanfield, I won't have it," interposed Mrs. Fullerton, quietly. "I know exactly what you are going to say. Best anything you like, but *not groomed.*"

"Best turned-out woman I know."

"That's painfully true," replied Mrs. Fullerton, gravely. "Very much turned out, Maude dear, are we not? But it's on the mountain-side and a good many miles from civilisation. You need not mock us for all that. I know I'm a

perfect guy; but you can't expect a woman to be anything else whose maid is leagues away from her. Do you think we shall have to stay here much longer?"

"I was just telling Sir Jasper that Wheldrake's latest news is that everything is progressing favourably. But we can learn nothing more definite than that."

"It really is to be hoped," said Maude, "that our captivity will not last very much longer. It is getting very awkward in the matter of dress, you know."

"Really," rejoined Glanfield, laconically; "had to wash my own shirt yesterday, you know, and I can't say it does me credit. Looks worse than when I began."

Matteo's tragical end had affected Patroceni in a way neither Leroux nor Hammerton had foreseen. The Count was puzzled; he had no theory whatever as to the cause of the crime. He most certainly did not suspect Hammerton, nor was it possible for him to suspect the real culprit, whom he did not even know to be alive. With what object had the innkeeper been assassinated? Obviously not for plunder, for his informants were very precise on that point, saying that no property of any kind had been touched. The Count was considerably put out about it, if only for this reason; Matteo was one of the shrewdest and most trusted agents he had in the city, one whom it would be hard to replace. That it could mean any menace to himself he thought very improbable; but the Count was much too old and practised not to be suspicious of even a chance blow aimed at one of his instruments. He did not understand this, and, like most men whose lot it has been to be much hunted, had more dread of the mysterious than clearly-defined danger. He had received no certain news from Hammerton about the ransom as yet. Hammerton indeed had only sent one communication through Matteo, which had been pretty much to the same effect as those that Leroux had despatched in Chisel's writing to Wheldrake, namely, that all arrangements were made, but must take a few days to conclude.

"It is no use," mused Patroceni, "and there is no one

I can trust. I have no one with brains enough to look into this thing for me. I must know why one of my emissaries is slain. Half my power round Naples would be gone if it was not known that it is dangerous to meddle with Patroceni's followers. If the police don't find Matteo's murderer *I will.* He'll fare no better in my hands than in theirs, and probably make a much quicker ending of it. No. There's only one thing for it—I must go into Naples myself. I'll start at daybreak to-morrow morning."

This was not so hazardous as it might sound. It has been before remarked that the Count was a man cunning in disguise. He had gone freely about the city under divers personations; but it was only of late that he and his followers had taken refuge in the woods above Amalfi, and it was only their last exploit that had attracted the attention of the police to their being there. During the two or three previous years, the Count and his followers had infested districts somewhat remote from Naples, and had only migrated upon finding they had made those districts too hot to hold them. The Count had always had his spies in Naples—indeed, he had spies pretty generally through the country. Many of these were his old political associates, who still kept up brisk communication with each other with the hope that the whirligig of time might bring to them another chance of snatching at the supreme power; and all of these recognised his Excellency as one of the most sagacious and daring leaders they had; so that between his brigandage and his Carbonari-ism the Count was kept well informed of what went on in most of the leading cities of Italy.

That Patroceni, if recognised, would be arrested, need scarcely be said; but the Count had quite as much confidence in his powers of impersonation as Leroux, and had more than once smoked his cigarette under the noses of the police, with a handsome reward offered for his apprehension. The Count was a man of decision—no sooner had he made up his mind than he sent for his lieutenant.

"Sarini," he said, as that worthy limped into the tent, "I must know the rights of Matteo's death. I intend that whoever took his life shall pay for it with his own. Nothing but fear of swift retribution keeps people loyal to us. We have to trust those who would sell us if they dared. I shall go into Naples myself, and see what I can make of it."

"Will it not be dangerous, Eccellenza, after our recent capture?"

"I don't think, my old comrade," rejoined Patroceni, with a sarcastic smile, "that either you or I ever recked much of that. You will stay here in command, and I know I can trust you, if anything happens to me, to exact retribution for it."

"Most assuredly. Let me hear that you are a prisoner, and your release shall be the condition of our captives' freedom; let me hear of your death and I will shoot them every one, women and all, with my own hand. I've followed you now, through storm and sunshine, for twenty-five years. You need not fear but what I'll stand to you still."

"No, my old comrade," rejoined the Count, and as he spoke there was a gleam of softness, rarely seen in Patroceni's keen, cold eyes. "I know I can trust you; you are true as steel. It is not very likely that I shall fall into the hands of the police. If I do, you must do the best you can for me; but at all events insist upon having a note in my handwriting before you come to terms. Don't be precipitate; but, old friend, do not let them send Patroceni across the Styx unattended."

A fierce glance of intelligence flashed across Sarini's face at these words. He, like his chief, was a man of education, and thoroughly understood the allusion.

"Never fear, Eccellenza," he replied. "If it is your fate to take passage in old Charon's boat I'll see that you have company across the river."

CHAPTER XLII.

THE DUMB PEDLAR.

The "Golden Bush" had no more constant *habitués* than Giovanni and Herr Stein. To the bandit it represented the principal attraction of his day. To his coarse, sensual nature the chief delights of this world were centered in eating and drinking, and, it may be, gambling, which, now he was in Naples, rather took the form of buying tickets in the lottery. There was no place in which he could indulge the former of these propensities so much at his ease as at this quiet tavern to which the police-agent had introduced him. Again, Giovanni had very few acquaintances in Naples, and under the present circumstances shrank from making any. He was not a man, although gregarious in his disposition, likely to attract strangers—far from it. They, as a rule, repelled the advances of the swart, ruffianly-looking bravo. He detested solitude—not that he was suffering in the least from that remorse which is so often pictured to us. An imaginative man of the higher order of intelligence may suffer agonies when in his solitary hours he is brought face to face with the memory of his crime, but the lower organizations of Giovanni's type are no more troubled by such recollections than a wild beast. It was simply that he wearied of his own company, and looked forward to this mid-day meal with Leroux as the pleasantest part of the twenty-four hours. He had no idea at present of leaving the city. He was far too well satisfied with his present quarters, and the money he obtained from Leroux made it no necessity for him to return to the hill-side. He hated work, but he disliked starvation more, and it was this originally that had been the cause of his turning bandit.

That Leroux should be as constant to their daily tryst as he could manage may easily be conceived. It was his sole

opportunity of communicating with the captives—his sole chance of obtaining any information as to what the brigands were about; and the police-agent was wonderfully keen about carrying out a pet scheme of his own, which, should it prove successful, would result in the capture of Patroceni and all his band.

But the best-laid schemes of mice and men, as Burns tells us, often go amiss; and there was this little drawback to Leroux's project—that any failure would probably cost the captives their lives. But the sanguine police-agent, although quite aware of this risk, would not permit himself to think of failure, and unluckily did not take into his counsels those principally concerned.

The pair were seated at their customary table, and Giovanni in full enjoyment of his meal.

"I suppose," said Leroux, "you have got no news for my friend?"

"Not yet," replied Giovanni; "the time is too short, Signor Stein. They could not possibly have brought a reply from the camp by this."

Evident from this speech that Giovanni has been tolerably confidential of late about his connection with the brigands. He still refuses to admit that he is of them, but makes no secret to his dear friend Signor Stein that he is on friendly terms with a good many of them, and knows his Excellency Count Patroceni himself very well. In good truth he might well say that, being little likely to forget his Excellency so long as there is breath in his body. Haughty, cold, cynical, and stern as the Count habitually was with his followers, there were times when, like all great commanders, he would unbend. Napoleon, when things went well, would jest with the veterans of the Grand Army. Patroceni, in like manner, would occasionally condescend to drink, smoke, and gamble with his followers; and, much as they looked up to him for his dauntless courage and subtle intellect, it may be doubted whether they did not hold him in still higher reverence for

his capabilities as a card-player. When he did join in the play it was generally a bad time for his followers. The Count was one of the finest artists in Europe at *compelling fortune* at any game of chance.

"No," rejoined Leroux, "I suppose there has hardly been time; but our client, you see, is anxious. He will have it that the tragedy in the Villa del Reale may probably affect the treatment of his friends. It is in vain I point out to him that the murderer of that luckless innkeeper can have nothing to say to Count Patroceni. Quite impossible, don't you think so?"

"Quite impossible," re-echoed Giovanni. "As if a man like his Excellency would care what happened to such scum as Matteo."

Leroux shot a keen glance at the speaker as he rejoined, "His—ah—what did you call him?—ah! Excellency, meaning, I suppose, Count Patroceni, was not likely to know anything of a man like that unfortunate. Still, I have heard that these brigand-chiefs have agents under all sorts of disguises. But you know, Signor Giovanni, what tales people will tell of a man like—like his Excellency. By the way, I didn't know that Count Patroceni went by that name."

"Yes, he does, amongst those that serve him. His followers hold him far higher than this new king who has just been pitchforked on to the throne. I don't understand these things myself, but we all think his Excellency and his friends are the proper men to govern us."

"And who are all?" inquired Leroux, quietly.

Rather an awkward question this. Giovanni was speaking with that laxity characteristic of much higher intelligences than his own. A tendency to state loosely "that every one says so," meaning yourself and about a score of your acquaintances, is a weakness very prevalent, which has led to much perversion of history. Leroux's question was an interrogatory eminently calculated to confuse a man like Giovanni.

"All!" he rejoined; "why, everybody! Who are all? Why, all the people you meet round about! Why do we call him his Excellency? Well, because he is his Excellency. Why do people call you Signor Stein?"

"Ah, true, true," replied Leroux. "I am very stupid. We are naturally called by our names." Or, he thought to himself, "what we give out to be our names; taken, too, in great measure by the world to be what we choose to label ourselves."

"No; his Excellency," resumed Giovanni, "is his Excellency because he was made so in one of these numerous revolts we have had, and which didn't come to anything. I never heard, but I daresay they made somebody his Majesty, and if his head is not cut off he is no doubt walking about somewhere. But the Count! Ah! they will never catch him."

"Yes, everybody talks of how clever his Excellency is."

"Clever!" replied Giovanni, in a low whisper; "he could walk straight through the bureau of police without being detected if he pleased. There's nothing he can't do. There's nothing he don't know. And a man's life is not worth a dish of macaroni who falls under his displeasure; and he is merciless, ah! so merciless, when he is offended."

As the last words, uttered in a low tone, escaped the bandit's lips, a pedlar entered the room, and, lifting his pack from off his shoulders, seated himself at a table adjoining,—a well-to-do pedlar apparently, well-clad, and in appearance not of the country. His hair was long and fair, and he wore coloured spectacles, probably on account of some weakness in his eyes; for his lithe wiry figure and general aspect by no means indicated age—a muscular man of medium height, and seemingly in his prime. He summoned the waiter by the simple process of rapping on the table, and having glanced over the bill of fare indicated what he wanted by pointing to it with his finger. Nothing escaped the trained eye of Leroux, and it was hardly likely that he would overlook the preternatural taciturnity of the new comer.

"You have known cases, no doubt, of the Count's relentlessness, Signor Giovanni?" observed Leroux, carelessly.

"Known!" repeated the bandit, who had by this, as usual, consumed a good deal of wine. "I've done more than know; I have seen. You will never mention it again, Signor Stein; but I saw him send a man out of the world one morning for no graver offence than being overpowered with thirst while engaged in his Excellency's business."

"What!" exclaimed the police-agent, with well-assumed horror; "you surely do not mean that Patroceni slew a man in cold blood merely because he had found the wine-cup too great a temptation?"

"If he did not kill him," rejoined Giovanni, "it was simply because his day had not come. He was carried away for dead."

"What unheard-of ferocity!" exclaimed Leroux. "Such an act of cruelty as that is sure to recoil on the perpetrator. I know little of the world, my excellent friend; but I should imagine that it would be dangerous to Count Patroceni that the victim of such barbarity escaped with his life."

"I don't understand," rejoined Giovanni, curtly.

"Simply this—that resentment of injury is implanted in the breasts of all mankind. Men are apt to be implacable with either undeserved or excessive punishment. A man who had suffered such unheard-of violence for so slight an offence would be dangerously likely to avenge it. Of course," continued Herr Stein, as he threw himself back in his chair and lit a fresh cigarette, "if he were not a man, but simply a cringing spaniel, his submitting to it is easy of comprehension."

Giovanni writhed a little uneasily under the words of this quiet, elderly citizen. The bandit had all the contempt for the dwellers in towns characteristic of the hill-men in all nations, characteristic indeed of the country-people everywhere. Your cockney may look down upon the yokel when he meets him in the streets of the metropolis—he may have

the best of it there. Flurried by the crowd and scenes he is unaccustomed to, the countryman in his confusion bows down before the arrogance of his city brother; but, for all that, the denizen of the fields, the man who is face to face with nature, who is conversant with the song of the throstle, with the rustle of the trees and the bloom of the hedges, has in his heart a supreme contempt for the dweller in the city, who knows nothing about the cheery melody of the hounds, the crack of the breechloader over the autumnal stubbles, or the very meaning of the May-fly being on.

The bandit said nothing; he was slow of thought, and the idea of cherishing resentment against Patroceni had never as yet crossed his mind. He regarded the Count as so far above him that he no more thought of revenging himself for the punishment he had received than a serf would have done in England in the days of the Saxons. With his equal, like Matteo, it had been different; but his Excellency—ah! their very lives were in his hands; and yet here was this quiet, elderly wine-merchant, who apparently looked upon it that such cruelty would naturally be resented. He was rather stung by Leroux's speech, as the crafty police-agent had intended he should be. He did not like that this townsman should appear to think him deficient in spirit, to fancy that he was a man who submitted meekly to injuries. Still, the idea that he should ever have lifted his hand against the Count seemed preposterous.

Leroux watched him silently: he guessed pretty well what was passing through Giovanni's mind, and wondered whether it was possible to blow that spark of resentment, that he felt he had kindled, into a flame.

"You don't understand," growled the bandit at last, quite oblivious that he was admitting that he himself had been the sufferer. "Giovanni would avenge his wrongs promptly on any other, but with his Excellency our lives are his, to do as he wills with."

At these words Leroux fancied that he saw the pedlar at

the adjoining table turn his head towards them. The man had, up to this, been apparently absorbed in his own humble repast, and the police-agent had noticed his extreme taciturnity. The few directions that it was requisite for him to give the waiters he had done by signs. A thought struck Leroux. Suddenly rising from his seat he crossed to the pedlar, and, with a courteous bow, proffered him a cigarette. The man took it, but, in answer to Leroux's "Pray permit me to offer you a cigarette," he expressed his acknowledgment of the civility pantomimically.

Then, seeing the perplexed look on Leroux's face, he shook his head, touched his mouth two or three times with his hand, and again shook his head.

"Why, I believe he is dumb!" exclaimed the police-agent.

As the exclamation escaped him, the pedlar produced a pencil from his vest, and, taking up the bill of fare, hastily scribbled on the back,—"I cannot speak, but am much obliged for your kindness."

Patroceni—for of course it was he—had assumed dumbness the moment he perceived Giovanni. He did not know who the police-agent might be, but he had long since learnt to mistrust all chance acquaintance. Further, there was Giovanni. He had not the slightest fear of that worthy penetrating his disguise, and after his last speech no fear of his intentions of betraying him; but he had no faith in Giovanni's discretion, and thought if the bandit recognised his voice he would show an astonishment that might arouse the attention of the spectators. Another thing, too, that flashed across the Count's mind—Who was this sober-going citizen with whom Giovanni, the hog, had contracted such an apparent intimacy? He knew, none better, what Giovanni was in a social point of view—a dull, stupid drunkard, blindly devoted to him, Patroceni, like a huge mastiff, but without the brute's intelligence. It was hardly likely that a man of some culture, such as the donor of the cigarette

undoubtedly was, should think it worth his while to cultivate Giovanni without an object.

Leroux had resumed his seat; the Count smoked on in silence, with his ears keenly alert to catch further conversation; but the talk between the police-agent and his guest languished. It was not that Leroux in the least despaired of gradually inflaming the mind of the bandit against Patroceni, but he saw that it would take more time than he could give to it. The pseudo-pedlar at length picked up his pack, bowed to Leroux, and took his departure.

"A great mistake!" muttered Patroceni, when he found himself in the street. "Why did I trust to a blow in dealing with such a thick-skulled brute as that? I ought to have shot him, as I originally meant. He is staunch enough at present, but I've no doubt his elderly friend is an emissary of the police. Granting Giovanni remains loyal, as he doubtless intends, it is not difficult to turn a clumsy drunkard like that inside out. I wonder whether that very polite gentleman had the slightest suspicion as to who I really was? As well for him, perhaps, he hadn't. If he were connected with the police he might have made a premature attempt to earn the five hundred pounds offered for my apprehension, which would have resulted in another tragedy in a place of public entertainment. Can Hammerton be playing me false? There's coquetting with the police on the part of some one."

CHAPTER XLIII.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

The more he thought over it the more convinced was Patroceni that Giovanni's new acquaintance had sinister designs of some sort, and now the Count had the loss of Matteo at once brought home to him. The chances were

that the dead innkeeper could have thrown some light upon this mysterious intimacy—at all events, he was the very man to discover who was Giovanni's new friend. True, that was a matter the Count could clear up for himself; but, for one thing, he had no intention of being more than a day in Naples; he had other things to look to, and he would hardly have the time to make this discovery for himself. And yet, if the police had got hold of Giovanni, the sooner he was ordered back to the mountains the better. A very unsafe adherent, thought the Count, to go through the ordeal of cross-examination. He had been very much astonished at the man's reappearance; neither seeing nor hearing anything of him since he struck him down, he had never doubted that Giovanni was dead; and he could not help thinking that it would have been better if he had never recovered. It was impossible to say what admissions might be drawn from this the very dullest of all his followers. So far the Count's inquiries concerning the death of Matteo had no results; there was no theory as to who the murderer was broached in the city. Conjecture was at fault, and, except Leroux, no one in Naples had a suspicion as to his entity.

The Count was struck with this; he had expected to find the name of the supposed assassin in all men's mouths. The story of the murder undoubtedly was; Carlo had done nothing but describe the appearance of the house ever since it was broken into; but, as to who the actual murderer was, no one professed knowledge. Still, though there was nothing to throw light upon Matteo's fate, the Count thought it just as well that he had visited the city. There was, very possibly, danger to be feared from Giovanni's indiscretion, and the sooner that worthy rejoined his comrades the safer it would be for them all. And then Patroceni made up his mind that he would call upon Hammerton. He, at all events, would hear direct how the negotiations for the ransom were progressing, and would caution the Captain against any attempt at foul play.

Hammerton's astonishment was considerable when he was informed that there was somebody wanting to see him. The first inquiry was, naturally, as to what manner of man this might be; and, upon being told that he was apparently a Jew pedlar, Hammerton was about promptly to decline the interview, when it suddenly occurred to him that this might be a messenger from Patroceni. He had heard nothing from the camp since he left, for he knew nothing of Chisel's correspondence, Leroux having cautioned the valet against showing Wheldrake's notes to any one, pointing out they might cost his master his life should they fall into the hands of the police. So, after turning it over for a minute or two in his own mind, he ordered the stranger to be shown up.

The pedlar made a low bow as he entered the room, and, without speaking, proceeded to open his pack. "No, thank you, my good fellow," exclaimed Hammerton, "I don't want anything."

The pedlar met this with a deprecatory shrug of his shoulders, and continued the unpacking of his box. But Hammerton suddenly became conscious of a quick, meaning glance, an impatient knitting of the brows, and a slight but rapid motion of his head in the direction of the waiter.

"That will do, thank you," said the Captain to that latter functionary. "Well, as you've come up I will look at your rubbish, but you must not be disappointed if I don't buy."

"Certainly not," rejoined the Count, in his natural tones, as the door closed. "I am selling, it is true, but not such gew-gaws as these; it's men's lives I deal in."

"The Count!" exclaimed Hammerton. "Deal in men's lives, forsooth! You are juggling with your own when you dare to call upon me at an hotel in Naples."

"I don't see that I run any danger," rejoined Patroceni, quietly. "It isn't that I place the slightest faith upon your honour. But, my friend, my mere apprehension would fill graves on the mountain. I don't suppose you care much about Wheldrake and Glanfield, but you would hardly like

to have Sir Jasper's blood upon your head, much less to endanger the lives of the ladies."

"You surely don't mean to say ——" exclaimed Hammerton.

"I merely mean that my wolves are hard to hold," interposed the Count. "If you knock the driver off the box you mustn't be surprised if the horses get out of hand. Now, what have you got to tell us?"

"I should have communicated with you before," replied Hammerton, "but you have perhaps not heard of the murder of that unfortunate Matteo?"

"Yes; what about it?"

"I know no more than does all Naples, that he was brutally slain by some one unknown the other night."

"What do the police think about it?" inquired Patroceni, sharply.

"How can I tell? You don't suppose I've seen anything of them. You may not believe me, but I've been loyal to my mission and carefully kept out of their way. The money will be ready for you in about a week now. I would have sent you word had I only known how."

"No!" said the Count, sternly. "I know you too well to put faith in you. Fool! do you suppose that I really permitted you to draw lots as to which of you should come to Naples? I did; but took excellent care as to who should be the winner. I told you once before that people who quarreled with me generally came to grief. Let me find any treachery on your part, and though you will think yourself beyond my reach you will find yourself mistaken."

"Count Patroceni," replied Hammerton, hastily, "I tell you I am honestly keeping faith with you. You feel you can insult me with impunity while you hold the lives of those dear to me in the hollow of your hand. Once let them be free, and you will give me the reparation one gentleman usually accords another."

Now this was a very pretty defiance as it stood, but it had

a palpable blot in it. The Count's reply was obvious. His lips curled as he said :

" One is under no obligation to go out with cardsharpers."

Hammerton sprang to his feet, and, for a moment, seemed about to throw himself upon Patroceni. Quick as lightning the Count drew a poignard from his vest.

"Stand back !" he said, authoritatively, " unless you would die before your time. Like Wheldrake, I have a presentiment, and that is that you will fall by my hand; at present remember you are an ambassador, and that your person, like that of all ambassadors, is sacred. Bring your negotiations here to a conclusion, and then it will be time enough to talk about reparation; though, even then I should require security that you did not come to the ground attended by a *posse* of gendarmes."

For a moment Hammerton's frame literally shook with passion. Then, recognising how completely he was in this man's power, he gulped down his wrath with a tremendous effort.

" You have come to Naples," he said at last, in tones that still vibrated slightly from anger, " apparently to insult me. You are too strong—I am at your mercy now; but the time will come ——"

" An excellent burst of melodrama, my friend," interposed Patroceni, contemptuously. "Exit, upper entrance, right, scowling and muttering. As I told you before, when the time does come I've an idea it will be unfortunate for you. At present I think I have no more to say, except this—I shall send an envoy in to see you this day week, when, I trust, you will be able to bring things to a satisfactory conclusion. Had you and Wheldrake not interfered with my engagements I should have been content to receive the ransom close to Naples. Now you must bring the money to the camp, and you must bring it in person. Wheldrake I could have trusted; rightly or wrongly, I distrust you, and your own life must be security for my want of faith in you.

The agreed sum once paid, the whole party shall be conducted in perfect safety to the scene of their capture. There carriages will be awaiting to convey you to Naples, and one and all, including yourself, need fear no further molestation unless you provoke it." And with these words the Count picked up his pack and departed.

Hammerton paced the room for some time after his visitor left him. He ground his teeth with impotent rage at the indignities he had been forced to submit to. What evil star had ever led him to cross this man's path in life? Everything had gone wrong with him ever since the encounter with Patroceni. He did not reflect that it was his own unfair play at the card-table that had placed him in the Count's power; that it was his own rascally scheme to ruin Wheldrake which had led to their all coming abroad, and so fall into the hands of the brigands. That the Count carried too many guns for him, Hammerton was now painfully aware. He was in the toils of a very superior scoundrel to himself; in the hands of a man of keen brain and iron nerve. He recognised it was futile to struggle against his antagonist, and, as his wrath quieted down, that the best thing he could do, this matter of the ransom once satisfactorily arranged, was to leave Italy, and devoutly hope that Patroceni might never cross his path again—a man, there was good hope, that might find his "career of industry" cut short before long. Brigand-chiefs of his calibre sooner or later fell victims to the prices offered for their apprehension; and, though Patroceni's ascendancy over his followers was marvellous, and their awe of him apparently immeasurable, still greed of gold would, probably, ere long induce one of his followers to betray him. If the annals of history afford numerous instances of wondrous fidelity in spite of all temptation, cases are also rife in which a heavy reward has not failed to produce the traitor it was designed to. And then, once again, Hammerton grimly reverted to the incredible fool he had been to continue his intimacy

with Patroceni. After coming to terms with him, and disgorging his winnings at Homburg, he ought to have left without beat of drum. But no. Lured by the insane idea that in Wheldrake he had snared a pigeon worth plucking, he lingered on, and an introduction to English society had been the price of the Count's silence about his malpractices at the card-table.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A BOLD RESOLUTION.

M. Leroux stands very much in the position of a very fine whist-player whose game is considerably too scientific for his partner. The police-agent has most thoroughly hoodwinked all concerned in the elaborate game that he is playing. Chisel, Giovanni, Hammerton, and even Pietro, Giovanni's confederate, have no suspicion of who he really is, or what end he is aiming at. The one man of all others that he would fain keep in ignorance of his proceedings happens not only to have arrived at a suspicion of his connection with the police, but also to have formed a misty idea that Leroux is pursuing a course inimical to his interests. The more Patroceni reflects upon his interview with Hammerton, the more he looks back upon Giovanni's intimacy with that elderly stranger at the "Golden Bush," the more convinced he is that either by design or accident these people are in communication with the police. As regards Hammerton, he had, so far, no evidence to go upon; but that the elderly gentleman who fraternised with Giovanni was what in his own vernacular is termed a "*mouton*" he had no doubt. What should he do? He had meant to return to the camp as soon as he had solved the problem of Matteo's murder. He had done nothing towards it as yet, and already saw that it was one of those mysteries not cleared up in a day or two. In the meantime he would walk up to the Villa del Reale and

look at the pavilion. Not probable that he would be allowed to go inside it, not probable that it would afford much information, even if he did so. All traces of the murder had, doubtless, been removed by this, and he would in all likelihood only have the looking at a closed tavern for his pains.

He was right in his conjecture. Still there was a knot of idlers there, gazing at the barred doors and closed shutters as if the walls would reveal the secret they held. Amongst these loungers a face suddenly caught the Count's attention. "A man I've seen before," he muttered. "I never forget a face. Where on earth have I seen his? An Englishman, too, evidently, by his dress. A face I've seen more than once; but where? Ah! I have it! It is Signor Wheldrake's servant. He loaded for him that day when we shot those covers by the brook at Wrottsley, the—the—ah! Hangers. Waited, too, every day at dinner. I should like to tell him his master is quite well," murmured the Count, with a smile; "but in the exuberance of his spirits he would probably go off and tell the police I said so, which would lead to unpleasant complications."

The Count shouldered his pack, and was about to leave the gardens when his attention was suddenly arrested by seeing Chisel touch his hat respectfully to some one. He turned round, and saw the valet stroll away in deep conversation with the same elderly gentleman who was so intimate with Giovanni.

To a man like Patroceni this was a revelation. He saw danger; he saw treachery all around him. He knew nothing about this old gentleman, had no idea what he affected to be, what he described himself as, but had no doubt whatever in his own mind that he was an agent of the police. And here he was in close communication with Giovanni, with Wheldrake's servant, and in all probability with Hammerton. No; he would be in no hurry to leave Naples. It was more important that he should sift this treachery to the dregs than return to camp. He saw no great danger in staying in

the city for two or three days longer, and keeping a watch over things; he could trust Sarini to keep strict ward over his captives, and, should the authorities lay him by the heels, to threaten dire retaliation if a hair of his head was injured.

The veriest villains have as a rule some staunch friend, and the Count and Sarini had gone through so many stricken fields, times of hardship, and deeds of blood together, that their feeling for each other was strong.

Sarini was perhaps the one man in whom the Count felt he could rely unflinchingly. His old comrade would be apt to become classical, and, after the manner of the ancients, sacrifice some lives to his memory should aught happen to him. Patroceni kept well away from Herr Stein and Chisel. He was much too clever to give them an opportunity of noticing him, and had not the slightest idea of appearing before them again in his present costume.

With great caution and at considerable distance he watched the pair for some time. They sat on one of the benches overlooking the Bay and talked earnestly together for some few minutes. Then they rose and left the gardens together, but had not proceeded far before they parted—the valet touching his hat with the greatest respect, while the old gentleman bade him adieu with kindly condescension.

For a moment the Count was puzzled. Which was he to follow? It was only for an instant. "What does it matter," he muttered, "where that thick-headed English servant lives? There is no danger to fear from him. No, no. That old gentleman with his silver-rimmed spectacles is far more likely to be the cause of trouble. Quite likely he sees as much over those silver-rimmed glasses as I do through these tinted ones of mine. Spectacles are regarded as an aid to sight. They have another attribute, not quite so generally known—they are pretty nearly as good for *non-sighting* other people. Spectacles, as a matter of disguise, have never yet had due appreciation."

Cautiously and afar did Patroceni follow his quarry; and if the police-agent could have only known that for once in his life he, the tracker of men, was being tracked, he would have experienced a new sensation. Honestly, I think Leroux would really have revelled in the situation; he would have felt like a crack *écarté* player, who finds himself opposed to a foeman worthy of his steel; engaged in a game, if agreed upon, looked on as quite fair according to the laws of the mountain, and also perfectly recognised *testé* Bret Harte on the slopes of California, namely, "As many cards up your sleeve as you can contrive without being found out." At length he saw Herr Stein turn in at the door of the "Golden Bush," and then Patroceni, with a low laugh, made his way to his own quarters in La Vicaria. This was just one of the adventures that gave salt to his existence; it was this that had made him a gamester, a conspirator, aye, even a brigand. It was this eternally pitting his head, his intellect, against other men, that was to him the very elixir of life. He exulted in this sort of contest—what matter, it was a game of heads, and in every sense of the word, too; his life the stake, and small profit to accrue from the saving of it! There are, and ever will be, men of this kind—conspirators from their youth up, who dream of power and thrones as in centuries gone by men raved of the philosopher's stone, or, later on, the alchemists of the "golden secret."

Did they but know it—and both the combatants in this game of strategy would have felt deeply interested in the result—the one was staking his professional reputation, the other his life; and both were thorough enthusiasts about all the intricacies of such a contest as they were engaged in. Still the Count had the advantage: he already suspected the police of being on his track, and was bent upon clearing up who that elderly gentleman in silver-rimmed spectacles might be. Leroux, on his side, although quite aware of what a clever adversary he had to combat, had no idea that

Patroceni was endeavouring to discover his individuality, or, indeed, that he was taking any other than his habitual precautions against police interference with his pursuits.

The thing that now puzzled the Count was how he was to get speech with this friend of Giovanni's without that worthy's presence. As for fresh disguise that was all easy enough. Agent of the police or no, he felt no doubt that he could pass before that elderly customer of the "Golden Bush" without his having the slightest conception that he was addressing the dumb pedlar, upon whom he had bestowed a cigarette only a few days before. But the Count knew that Giovanni would recognise him at once by his voice, and he was too thoroughly aware of the awe in which he was held by the lower class of his followers not to know that the bandit would be so startled as to inevitably betray his discovery.

He supposed he must try the tavern again, as he did not know where else as yet he was likely to come across Giovanni's friend. But he felt very little hope of obtaining such an opportunity as he wanted there. He felt pretty sure that Giovanni habitually out-sat his companion. His one chance, he thought, would be to follow this man when he left, and trust to scraping an acquaintance with him casually in the streets. But how? On what pretext? Easy to address him, no doubt, on a dozen excuses, but to involve him in conversation there must be something more than this. At a tavern it would be easy, but in the streets —ah! that was a different matter.

The Count, in his room in La Vicaria, pondered over this a good deal. It had to be done, and, of course, he would do it. He had managed many more difficult things than this; but, at the same time, how it was to be done on this occasion did not exactly occur to him.

Patroceni smoked and smoked, and turned this thing over in his mind. At last he conceived an idea which, for

audacity, was quite worthy of his genius. He would turn informer on himself! He, Count Patroceni, would profess to instruct the police how to capture himself. He would cautiously consult this old gentleman about how to put himself in communication with the police, guardedly admitting that he had some information concerning the brigands in the woods above Amalfi that he would be glad to part with for a consideration. If he was right in his conjecture that Giovanni's new friend was an agent of the police he would be pretty sure to tumble into that trap, and in his thirst for further intelligence would unwittingly dis close how much he really knew.

The idea was bold; it was Rob Roy in the Tolbooth, with no Baillie Nicol Jarvie or "Dugald creature" to fall back upon in case of need.

Now for disguise: that was easy and obvious; he must be attired as one of the peasants of those parts. "Then," thought the Count, with a light laugh, "if I am a little bit soft in the head it will perhaps be all the more effective." Could a bystander have overlooked both hands he might have been very much puzzled to predict whether the Count or the police-agent would eventually be the winner; but about one thing he would have no doubt, namely, that a very few days now must bring them actively into collision.

Leroux and the Neapolitan police could make nothing out of the murder in the Villa del Reale. Whoever Matteo's assassin had been he had done his work effectually and left not a trace behind him.

That it was the work of one man only they had come to the conclusion, on the evidence of the broken glass picked up on the floor of the parlour. It was clear that these represented the fragments of only two tumblers, and this the police held proof that Matteo had entertained but one guest upon that fatal night. This mattered little to Leroux. Quite possible he might never be able to prove it, but he had no doubt whatever as to who the real murderer was.

So far, indeed, he thought, it had been rather an advantage to him; it had removed one who seemed inclined to keep a vigilant eye on his intimacy with Giovanni, and it was absolutely necessary, for carrying out Leroux's plans, that he should have unrestricted intimacy with that unprepossessing acquaintance. It was considerably past midday when Leroux emerged from the "Golden Bush." His sitting with Giovanni had been somewhat prolonged, for there had been delicate negotiations going on between him and the bandit. It was evident to Leroux, from the note that Giovanni had brought him, that the murder of Matteo had produced considerable stir in the camp; though nothing could be more guarded than Wheldrake's laconic reply. After the usual formula that they were all well, but wearying of their captivity, came the significant line—"We have seen nothing of our host for two days, though it is hardly likely the tragedy you mention has aught to say to his absence."

This to Leroux meant much, as he understood it. It told him that Patroceni had left the camp. Now was the time for him to execute his surprise, to play for his great *coup*, to capture the camp, to carry back the captives in triumph to Naples, with the brigands handcuffed two and two at the wheels of his chariot, and that done to scour the country for their fugitive chief. In pursuance of this design he had not only without much difficulty persuaded Giovanni to forward another *closed* letter to Wheldrake, but also to forward another basket of wine to his confederate Pietro. About this last there had certainly been some little argument—Giovanni, in the openness of his heart and the plenitude of his feelings, having at first declared that he was quite capable of dealing with it himself, and it was only when Herr Stein had administered a long lecture upon the necessity and advisability of keeping his confederate in the brigands' camp in good humour, supplemented with the threat of the *déjeuners* being discontinued, that Giovanni promised to yield to his wishes. Having attained his end, but considerably wearied

by his task, with a sigh of relief the police-agent rose, wished Giovanni good day, and took his departure. Ere he had gone far up the street he was accosted by a peasant, who, in a vacant manner, asked him where the police lived.

CHAPTER XLV.

"DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND."

Leroux stopped, and from behind his glasses shot a keen glance at his questioner. Nothing to be read in the rather troubled dark eyes, no longer concealed by spectacles, and the somewhat bewildered face that met his gaze. "And what do you want with the police?" he inquired.

"I'm not used to crowds, and you see I get dazed-like when I get amongst all the houses and people in a big town. My home is in the country, out there afoot of the hills towards Amalfi."

"Dear me!" thought Leroux; "a neighbour, perhaps an acquaintance, of my good friend Giovanni. I shall be on intimate terms with all the country-side there before long. And you want to see the police?" he continued, aloud.

"Yes; it's hard to get a living on the edge of the mountain, signor; the corn won't grow, and then they tell me I'm not very clever, and don't know how to make the most of our bit of land. And then, signor, I've had bad luck with the goats lately; one or two of them have died, and the others don't have kids as other people's do. They tell me they are too old, but I've no money to buy younger ones with."

"But what on earth, my good man, have the police got to do with all this?"

"I don't know; but they tell me there has been a great murder committed in the city here, and that the police are offering a reward to anybody who can give them any information about it."

"And you think you can?" said Leroux.

"No; what should I know about it? I was miles away from Naples when it took place; but if the police give money for information of one sort I thought perhaps they would give money for information of another; and life is so hard, signor, and money still harder to come by. Can you tell me why it is that some men grow rich and others grow poor?"

The utter vacuous face of the speaker completely baffled the shrewd police-agent. He peered into his questioner's face over his glasses as if he would read his very soul, but saw nothing but a dreamy, far-away look, as if his questioner was already lost in speculation over the problem he had propounded, and was quite oblivious of the object which had brought him to Naples."

"Now what information is it you have to dispose of to the police?" inquired Leroux, after a considerable pause.

The peasant's face lit up with a cunning smile as he rejoined—

"If I told you it would be no longer mine to dispose of. You might sell it to the police and forestall me."

"I am going that way," replied Leroux, "and will show you where the bureau is: but you are quite right—keep what you have got to tell to yourself. Only remember this: you will have to give the police some idea of what you wish to dispose of, or else they will probably not think it worth their while to listen to you."

"It will be hard that; for I have walked a long way to try and turn an honest penny. Listen!"—and the speaker dropped his voice almost to a whisper as he said—"it's something about the brigands."

"I don't know, but I think that would very possibly fetch its price," rejoined Leroux.

"What do you think they would give? I could show them where they are, but maybe they wouldn't care to meddle with them. There are a good many of them, and

they are well armed. It would be more dangerous than hunting a single man."

Once more Leroux shot a keen glance at the speaker. Was there covered sarcasm in his remark, or was it made in all innocence? But not a trace of irony was to be seen on the somewhat meaningless face. Patroceni—for of course he it was—enjoyed a singular faculty of being able to assume (with the assistance of some slight "make-up") a half-witted expression that had done him infinite service before now.

"If you can do that," replied Leroux, "I don't doubt but what you will be well paid for it. Count Patroceni is said to be swift and merciless in his revenge. If he happened to escape you might find yourself in considerable danger."

"Life is so hard, signor," rejoined the peasant, doggedly. "I suppose to get money one must risk something."

Leroux was rather puzzled what to do. To go to the bureau of police with this peasant would be to run the risk of confessing his connection with them. He was anxious to know what this man had to tell. It might amount to a mere nothing; still, he could not afford to neglect any opportunity of obtaining knowledge concerning Patroceni and his followers. For instance, he knew nothing about their exact locality. The woods above Amalfi were extensive, impossible to surround, and it was quite likely that, in scouring the woods in search of their camp, to give them the alarm, and on finally discovering it to find nothing but the smouldering fires as evidence of its late occupation. He was getting letters conveyed to this camp; he was getting wine transmitted to it: but even when everything was ripe for his grand *coup* he was painfully conscious that he lacked a guide thither. He had for some time built upon inducing Giovanni to play that *rôle*. But he had of late very great misgivings upon that subject. Giovanni, in his greed for gold and wine, saw no harm in assisting him to communicate with the camp. But from whatever motives, whether

it was from fear or from that innate sense of shame which forbids such men to turn informer, he was evidently staunch to his comrades. Quite clear that if he suspected danger to them he would not only instantly withdraw from this surreptitious post that he was at present conducting, but further give them due notice that the authorities were on their track. He admitted having had terrible punishment dealt out to him by the Count; punishment, too, that he deemed his offence scarcely warranted. But Leroux could see that he was perfectly unswerving in devotion to his chief, and that no gold would induce him to play the part of Iscariot. Mechanically Leroux strolled up in the direction of the Villa del Reale, where the countryman followed him, with all the apparent confidence that a lost dog displays when meeting a friend.

"Ah, signor, this is grand," said the peasant, as Leroux led the way into the gardens. "Ah, the sea! It is beautiful. I seldom see it, but I love it: not but what I am fond of the woods too, and know them as I shall never know the blue waters. Would you believe it, signor, I was never afloat in my life."

"A happy solution of the difficulty," thought Leroux. "I dare not take him to the bureau. What if I give him an hour in the Bay? Seated in the stern-sheets of a boat, while two fellows pull us about, one can talk. Would you like to go on the water?" he suddenly exclaimed, aloud.

"Oh, signor," cried the *soi-disant* peasant, "it is too much, but I should be afraid by myself. These boatmen laugh at us country-folks, I am told, and they are apt to be rough with us. No, signor, I dare not trust myself."

"Nonsense, man!" replied Leroux. "I will go with you. We will smoke a cigarette on the water this glorious afternoon. The sun is dipping, and it is just the time to enjoy it. You would have plenty of time to trot up to the police-bureau afterwards. As for his Excellency the Count Patro-

ceni and his friends, they will be doubtless picnicking where you left them. Come."

With many protestations of delight the peasant accepted the invitation, and the two men left the gardens to procure a boat.

Two men pitted against each other like two birds in a cockpit—spurred, too, for the matter of that. Unarmed as they both looked, a revolver lurked in the breast of each of them. A few minutes and they were gliding smoothly and swiftly across the blue waters, heading towards Capri, albeit with no intention of reaching that island. They were out nominally for a row, but in reality it was a duel between two subtle intellects, each vigorously striving to sqneeze the brains of the other. The Count undoubtedly started with odds in his favour. He had a vague idea of his companion's position, and naturally gave him credit for being a shrewd, clever man. Leroux, on the contrary, was quite in the dark about his adversary, and, more unluckily still, was grievously under-rating his brain-power. Keen practised hand as the police-agent was, Patroceni had so far imposed on him that he regarded him as a simple countryman, and if not an imbecile at all events somewhat half-witted.

"You know something of these brigands. I daresay you've seen this Count Patroceni, about whom all men are talking?"

"May be I have—there's more see him than wish to."

"And more wishing to than can get speech with him," rejoined Leroux. "I fancy, if you can bring the police and him together, that you will be handsomely paid for such service."

"What do you think they would give?" inquired the countryman, with an admirable assumption of that look of low cunning so characteristic of his class when their self-interest is aroused.

"I can't say; the police alone could tell you that. I should like very much to see this famous Count myself."

"*You*, signor? why, what could you want to see him about?"

"Curiosity, my man," rejoined Leroux. "He is a man of mark, and since his last exploit of carrying off this English milord the city is ringing with stories about him. It seems he has been famous for years. All men have a passion for seeing celebrities."

"If you will make it worth my while I can take you to him," said the peasant, in a low voice.

"Ah," replied Leroux, laughing, "that is not quite what I meant. No, no, my friend; I've no wish to go up into your forests above Amalfi for an interview with the most famous robber of modern times. I might find it not so easy to come back again."

"You can't think that the Count would venture into Naples? It might be more difficult for him to get back than for you to return from the mountains. This is glorious, signor! I should like to be rowed about and smoke all the afternoon."

"That would be entirely to neglect your business," rejoined Leroux.

"One cannot be always thinking of business," replied the other. "It is only when one is hungry that one thinks of business."

"A mere animal," thought the police-agent; "would like to bask in the sunshine till moved by hunger to exert itself; with hardly brains to be predatory in its habits, and with just enough low cunning to pick up a living by fraud. Quite willing, apparently, to sell the bit of information he has obtained concerning Patroceni. He may be a very useful tool this, and I must see him again, but it must be next time in my own character;" and then Leroux remarked aloud, "We must be going back now, as I am sorry to say I have

no further time to spend on the water," and the police-agent motioned to the rowers to turn back.

"It is too soon; I could stay out here for ever. I was never in a boat before. The ripple of the water against the boat-side reminds me of the rustle of the leaves as the wind sighs through the trees."

"The affairs of this life must be attended to," said Leroux, as they neared the quay. "I have a friend who holds an appointment in the bureau; it is too late to-day, but if you take this up there to-morrow, and send it in to the police-agent, Leroux, he will tell you all you want to know, and I should think you have a chance of driving a very profitable bargain."

"Ah! so many thanks, signor," said the countryman as they disembarked; "I thank you for your kindness to a poor peasant. I thank you for a charming row. I thank you for having shown me how to dispose of my wares to the best advantage. Heaven's blessing upon you, signor! God will be good to one who is so kind to the poor."

Amidst this shower of protestations, Herr Stein scribbled a few lines on a leaf in his pocket-book, tore it out and handed it to his companion, and then took his departure.

"Dispose of his wares, the scoundrel!" quoth Leroux, as he walked away. "He is taking the thirty pieces of silver, and invoking Heaven's blessings on the head of the purchaser."

CHAPTER XLVI.

A RACE FOR THE HILLS.

Patroceni lounged on the quay, watching the police-agent till he was out of sight. "There is no doubt about it," he muttered. "I was perfectly right. That man is a myrmidom of the police. At whose instigation are they seeking

for my whereabouts? Surely, they will hardly be so mad as to take active measures against me while I hold these prisoners in my hand. It can only be at the promptings of one of these fat-headed islanders themselves. My own countrymen would never make such mistakes, much less"—and his lip curled at the thought—"with Patroceni. If I've done nothing else in all these years, I think I have taught the authorities to understand that I am a man of my word, and little given to flinch from the execution of any threats that I may utter. No; pressure of some kind must have been put upon them, or they would never proceed in this way. Matteo is a great loss. He would have ferreted out the rights of this for me before the week was out. I suppose, though, it is to be accounted for in only one way; that triple-dyed scoundrel, to whom, apparently, in sheer perverseness, these unfortunates would entrust the arranging of their ransom, is playing fast and loose with every one. What madness possessed Wheldrake to change places with him? If there was a man breathing who knew what a scoundrel Hammerton was, it should have been he. If there was one man who ought to have known the risk of leaving a delicate affair like this in Hammerton's hands, it was Wheldrake. If there was a man who had suffered bitter wrong from Hammerton, once more it was he. What could have been his object? Why did he take the fate of those he loved out of his own direction, and hand it over to a man like this? Well, it is done. Mr. Wheldrake, in a moment of infatuation, has thought proper to interfere with the conducting of my affairs. He is likely to pay for it with his life. I can only say that his blood, and that of his friends, be upon his own head. I will go back not one iota from what I have said: in the meantime the sooner I am off to the mountains the better. I can do no good here, and if the police try to beat up my lair so much the worse for my prisoners."

Pleasant reflections these for a good many people could they have known them, but the Count was not given to

make *confidants*, and that night he vanished silently from the city and took his way back to the woods above Amalfi.

Police-agent Leroux was not a little puzzled by the non-appearance next morning of his acquaintance of the previous day. He had made every preparation for his reception, had given orders that he should be at once admitted to his own room as soon as the scrap of paper he had given him should be produced. But that money-seeking peasant never turned up, and as the day wore on a doubt stole over Leroux's mind as to whether that peasant had been quite so innocent as he seemed to be. True, he thought a stupid fellow like that might have fallen into bad hands—might be lying drugged and half-stripped in some of the lower parts of the city. All this was very probable; but for all that Leroux could not get over an uneasy feeling that for the first time he had come in contact with a spy of the famous bandit-chief, who had guessed what he himself was. As he thought over their conversation, while rowing about on the Bay, he was conscious that he had displayed over-eagerness to be in possession of Patroceni's exact whereabouts. But surely that stupid peasant could have had no deeper design than he professed—to wit, to dispose of such information as he possessed about the haunts of the brigands to the best advantage. Doubtful, when tested, whether what he did know was matter of much importance; still, in the rather tortuous game that Leroux was playing, he knew that he could not afford to neglect the slightest chance that presented itself. He bore in mind, too, that he was playing against a very clever and very crafty antagonist, one famous for his stratagems, who had passed his life in one incessant struggle with those in authority. And again, Leroux wished that simple countryman would make his appearance and disburden himself of what he had to tell. If Patroceni should come to suspect that the Neapolitan police were really taking active measures against him, then Leroux knew from his colleagues in the bureau that it would be in accordance with all the traditions

of Italian brigandage to put his captives to death. The police-agent might well feel a little grave over this state of the case. He knew well what a mistake of that kind meant, so far as he was concerned—dismissal from his appointment would probably be supplemented by an indefinite term of years at the galleys—till such period, in all likelihood, as his offending had died out of men's minds—and, as by that his very existence would have probably died out of the memory of the ruling powers, that might possibly be his destiny for life. The more he thought it over the more police-agent Leroux felt confirmed in his opinion that there was no time to lose—that it behoved him to strike quickly.

His scouts should leave Naples that night, and feel their way leisurely forward towards the woods above Amalfi. That a guide to the brigands' camp would simplify matters was without doubt. But this innocent peasant had not re-appeared, and Giovanni had not as yet been aroused to that sense of his wrongs which would induce him to betray his chief. No; he had arrived at a fair idea of the *locale* in which the bandits were encamped; the exact spot he must trust his scouts to discover. The great thing he had to impress upon them, at first, was caution. Let them not be precipitate; be in no hurry to discover the stronghold of Patroceni and his men, but saunter along leisurely as if they had no definite aim; time enough for them to push on in earnest when they heard that Leroux with the main body was close behind them in support.

Such were the peremptory orders that the police-agent gave to his subordinates. He had thought the whole campaign out as carefully as a Marlborough might have done, and was conducting it on a miniature scale with as much energy and ability. He had sounded the advance, and his *tirailleurs* were already creeping steadily forward. Like many another great commander, Leroux waited for some final information, and that he trusted to obtain at mid-day from Giovanni at the "Golden Bush." No sooner had he

given up all hope of the re-appearance of that open-hearted countryman, with his secret information for sale, than he had promptly issued his orders. All he awaited now was to hear that the last hamper of wine had been duly received in the camp. He could not move too quickly after that. Patroceni's followers were thirsty souls, and little likely to keep wine-flasks uncorked. Let Pietro and his friends only appreciate this hamper to the extent they had done the previous ones, and, according to Leroux's calculations, two-thirds of Patroceni's followers would be *hors de combat. Every bottle of that wine was drugged, and not a man who partook deeply of it was likely to recover his senses for many hours.*

It must not be supposed that Leroux's men had not received their orders before this. Some of his advanced scouts were already on the other side of Pompeii, and the main body of gendarmerie had already for some days been stationed at that place, with the avowed object of protecting the road to Amalfi from brigandage. Ostentatious patrolling had constantly taken place for the purpose of throwing dust in Patroceni's eyes. And so far it had succeeded. The Count had no idea that the Neapolitan police really contemplated beating up his quarters. He looked upon this as a mere flourish of trumpets for the benefit of the public; a protest from the Government that they intended to stamp out brigandage with a strong hand; a hint to himself that there must be no more kidnapping of wealthy Englishmen, at all events in the neighbourhood of Naples, for some time. Shrewd as he was it had never occurred to Patroceni that the presence of all these gendarmes in Pompeii was anything more than demonstration. He had a right to think so. He had much experience of the putting down of brigandage by the Bourbons, and knew that the leader of the party was ever to be bought if the transgressors deemed it worth their while. As a rule it was not; it was something like shirking a master in a big public school. The gendarmerie no more

wanted to see the brigands than the master does the transgressing schoolboy.

Leroux discovered Giovanni on his accustomed seat at the "Golden Bush," and speedily ascertained from that worthy that the wine had safely reached its destination.

"The dogs! they are longing for a bout of it. I wish I was with them; but his Excellency is away, and Signor Sarini, who holds command there now, is a stern disciplinarian. Santo Diavolo! there would be much desertion from the band if Signor Sarini were chief!"

"You seem to know these followers of Count Patroceni pretty well," said Leroux, laughing.

"Ha! ha! my little man, we dwellers on the country-side are not scared at people of this sort as you city fellows are."

"No," rejoined Leroux, contemptuously, "we are scared at them, and yet I don't suppose there's a man in the city who had been visited with such cruel punishment as you—I mean as you describe—for such a trivial offence, who would not have bided his time, and ere long flown like a wild cat at his adversary's throat."

"It's all very well," growled the bandit, "but you don't know his Excellency."

"No, signor. I am an old man, and am scarce likely to make his acquaintance, but if he had treated me as he treated you—I mean your friend—I don't think the length and breadth of Italy would have kept us apart."

Giovanni said nothing, but gulped down another bumper of wine.

"No," he said at length, doggedly, "I will not turn against his Excellency."

"Signor Giovanni," said Leroux, rising, "I regret that I must leave you; it is possible you will not see me again for two or three days, for business calls me in the direction of Amalfi. Why should I disguise it from you, my friend? I have to play a very subordinate part in the arrangement

that has been made for the release of these Englishmen. It is possible I may even see his Excellency Count Patroceni, even speak to this man, at whose frown you tremble. I doubt his impressing me to that extent." And Leroux's lip curled as he shook hands with the brigand.

Giovanni slowly finished his wine while he pondered over Leroux's last remark. For once the police-agent had overreached himself. He had sought to sting Giovanni into revenging his injuries, but he had gone a little too far when he said that he was going towards Amalfi to meet the Count about that matter of the ransom. It began to dawn upon the bandit's slow intelligence that he had perhaps been indiscreet in talking so freely before a stranger. He recollected what mischief his tongue had led him into that day when he was told to watch the Englishman. Surely, he could have said nothing that could by any possibility bring harm to his comrades. That the Count and his followers were in the hills above Amalfi was no news to any one. He had doggedly refused to take part against him; but, ha! there were those letters. He did not know what might come of them. Fool that he had been to take this Signor Stein's gold: and yet there could hardly be harm in a letter, and the gold was bright red gold, and he loved gold, or rather what gold could give him. Still, he felt uneasy in his mind, and suddenly resolved that he would make his way back to the camp, and, at all events, give notice that the people were coming with the ransom for the prisoners. It still in no wise dawned upon his mind that the affable old gentleman who had entertained him so hospitably almost daily was connected with the police. It was a vague feeling of uneasiness that impelled him to hurry back to the hills and give his comrades warning, though what he was to warn them against was by no means very clear to him.

The bandit rose from his chair, and leaving the "Golden Bush" made his way rapidly back to his lodgings in La Vicaria. His preparations for the journey were soon made,

and before the sun dropped he was on his way. Three men, speeding rapidly towards that camp on the plateau, and each in ignorance of the others' movements: Patroceni scouring back to his lair amidst the woods to warn his men to be on the alert, and with ominous thoughts concerning some of those captives in his keeping; police-agent Leroux has the like goal in view, bent on pushing on there with all possible speed and the myrmidons of the law at his back; and there again is thick-headed, drunken, blundering Giovanni, dimly conscious of danger, pressing forward to warn all his comrades of undreamt-of perils.

CHAPTER XLVII.

TO DIE AT DAYBREAK.

Patroceni, with his suspicions aroused, sped back to the camp with eyes and ears open to every sign of danger. He passed through Pompeii, noticing the gendarmerie posted there as he did so. He was prepared for this. He had been informed that in consequence of the capture of Sir Jasper and his party the authorities had established a post there for the purpose of patrolling the road to Amalfi.

On his way to Naples he had seen himself that this was true, but it was by no means to be deduced by that they had the slightest intention of taking active measures against himself and his followers. He had had too much experience of the powers that be in Italy (the Italy of the days I am writing of) to feel much disturbed about that. But what caught the Count's quick eye at once as he repassed through the town was the great addition that had been made to the force there since some forty-eight hours before. He felt sure that there were at least three of the police where there had been but one before.

"Something more than a demonstration this!" he muttered

to himself; "and yet they surely can't be such fools as to attempt to meddle with me under the present circumstances."

When he left the road and struck across country towards the woods he speedily became conscious of unfamiliar faces. He did not pass many men; but he saw figures in the distance, both right and left of him. Peasants they were apparently; but Patroceni's quick eye detected that if they were peasants they were at all events peasants that had been through the drill-sergeant's hands. He spoke to one or two of them, and the rather lame replies they gave to his questions convinced him that these men were either police or soldiers in the garb of peasants. Rapidly the Count awoke to the conviction that he was passing through a cordon of skirmishers, who were very slowly feeling their way towards the woods where the camp was pitched. He thought he detected a half-tendency to stop him; only none of those he passed quite liked to take that responsibility upon themselves.

"Betrayed!" muttered the Count to himself, as he pushed rapidly onwards. "That scoundrel Hammerton has doubtless gone to the police, in spite of all his asseverations to the contrary, and this is the result. The miserable fools think they can trap Patroceni. They are pushing forward this body of scouts, evidently feeling for our encampment. All that force I saw at Pompeii will—they doubtless are—being pushed forward as fast as possible to the attack. Captain Hammerton, the lives of your friends wax short. When they have seen the sun rise twice they may say goodbye to this world; and for you," muttered the Count, "let your cowardly carcase be within striking distance for a few more days and you also will have done with things terrestrial, even if my own life pays the penalty. Mistake! yes, a mistake!" he continued, as he breasted the hill. "Well! we are all liable to error." And the Count made this reflection in the same sort of spirit that a benevolent man might have done regarding ill-judged charitable relief. "Had I

followed my natural instincts and simply put an end to Giovanni and also Hammerton,—the one dangerous to me through his drunken stupidity, the other from his utter falsity,—I should have been in no straits now, and the chances are two infinitely better men would have been spared."

Insensible, apparently, to fatigue or want of food, Patroceni tramped on the livelong night. He passed that hut on the mountain where Wheldrake had slept on his way to the plateau, pausing there only for a drink of cold water and to hear what the nominal shepherds had to tell him. They formed the extreme outpost of his camp, and in answer to his inquiries replied that they had noticed no strangers about the country. Sarini's vigilance had apparently not yet been alarmed. Patroceni still continued to push on with all the speed he could muster—a wiry, muscular man, with great powers of endurance, which had been tested many a time and oft in his adventurous life.

To reach the camp as quickly as possible was now his object. He had made up his mind he would sacrifice his prisoners at daybreak the next morning and retreat with a picked body of his followers, carrying Sir Jasper with him. One thing only troubled him: What was he to do with the women? He did not want to slay them. Pitiless as he was there was something repugnant to him in the idea of taking a woman's life, and yet it was impossible to take them with him on such a rapid retreat as he contemplated. As for Wheldrake, he had brought his fate upon himself, and indeed doomed Glanfield and Jackson to destruction as well. Yes, Glanfield must die; he regretted it, but it was an exigency that could not be avoided. One prisoner was as much as he could be hampered with. As for Jackson—well, a butler more or less was of no great matter in the world. But the women! What was he to do with the women? Ah! he had it! He would leave them behind him. They

would be sure to be discovered in a day or two, and would take no harm for that time.

It was late in the afternoon when Patroceni reached the camp, and, sending one of his men for Sarini, made the best of his way to his own tent. Sarini! that was another thing to be considered. What was he to do with his trusty lieutenant, who, though much better, was still too lame for such a rapid march as he contemplated? He had not to wait long before Sarini presented himself and listened quietly to the news his chief brought.

"I made nothing out of Matteo's murder. People are so utterly at fault they don't even know whom to suspect, but it is as well I went to Naples. We are betrayed, Sarini. The police have got hold of that drunken idiot Giovanni. Signor Hammerton, too, I feel quite sure, is in communication with them besides."

"Giovanni!" exclaimed Sarini; "I did not even know that he was alive; I thought your Excellency *dismissed* him from our ranks for good."

"No; he lives, and could they but persuade him to show them the way to the camp they would probably be upon us this night; as it is I passed through their scouts, who are slowly feeling their way across the hills. They don't know precisely where we are at present."

"Your Excellency will not wait for them, I presume," said Sarini; "and the Signor Hammerton's treachery will entail its usual consequences on his friends."

"The prisoners will die at daybreak, with the exception of Sir Jasper," rejoined the Count, curtly. "We don't shoot women, so I shall leave them behind. The rest of us must be many miles away by to-morrow night. There is only one question: What shall we do with you? Your ancle is hardly strong enough, as yet, to stand such hard work as lies before us."

"No, Eccellenza, I should only break down. I shall take

refuge in one of the shepherds' huts about. I am not likely to be interfered with, unless Giovanni points me out."

"No," returned Patroceni, quietly, "he'll not do that. He is betraying us unwittingly; he is very stupid and he will drink. The police have got hold of him, and know that he belongs to us. He does not know it, but he lives under perpetual cross-examination. You will run no risk as far as he is concerned."

"Never mind me, Eccellenza, I can take care of myself; but from what you tell me it is very possible that we shall be attacked before daybreak. Between threats and gold our ill-advised friends from Naples will not find much difficulty about getting a guide to our retreat. We shall have an account to settle with Signor Hammerton that neither you nor I, Count, are the men to forget. And these others: shall you give them notice of their fate? It will be as well, poor devils, to grant them time to make their peace with God."

"Yes; most men have last words and last messages to leave behind them. God pity those, Sarini, like ourselves, with neither kith nor kin, and whose last words can be no more than a prayer for our country! We have spent our lives in pursuit of the grand idea of an Italian Republic; we have been on the crest of every little storm-wave from our boyhood; we have waded through bloodshed, danger, and what the world calls crime—nay, worse, they would more likely say murder!—and all to what end? In the vainest pursuit of a chimera that we seem as far from as when we began. It is too late to change our political creed. We must go on, and levy taxes for our country."

Grandiloquent sentences these, such as fanatics like the Count and Sarini are wont to use in justifying to themselves their deeds of rapine and bloodshed. Much argument of this sort is rife, I should think, amongst the leading statesmen in those South American Republics that physically and politically live an existence of earthquakes. As for the Count

and Sarini, they were the regenerators of Italy, no doubt; but it was a regeneration of which the principal idea was that they should be at the helm of public affairs. No other scheme of Government was quite satisfactory to these patriots.

"Yes," continued Patroceni, after a long pause, "it is only just to give men time when possible to make up their accounts in this world. Fetch Wheldrake and Glanfield here; never mind about the servant, he has lived in terror of his life, I fancy, ever since he has been here. It will be a sin to disturb his last night's slumbers."

Sarini stole noiselessly from the tent, not the first time by many that he had warned men they were to die at daybreak. And in good truth there had been times in his stormy career in which night after night he had expected a like lullaby ere he laid his head on the pillow. A few minutes, and he returned accompanied by the two victims.

"Gentlemen," said Patroceni, with a courteous bow, "I regret to say that I have unpleasant news to communicate to you. I must in my own defence point out to Signor Wheldrake that it was his own rash interference with my plans which has caused this sad necessity. The police are advancing to your rescue—instigated, I have little doubt, by Captain Hammerton. I warned you, gentlemen, what would infallibly be the result of any such movement on their part. I will be perfectly candid with you. To await an attack here would be madness on my part. I should be so outnumbered that if repulsed at first their ultimate success would be certain, whilst the possibility of a retreat would be lost. To carry so many of you with me as prisoners is impossible. The men must die. The ladies I shall leave behind me. A dull day or so is all the inconvenience they are likely to suffer before assistance comes to them."

"I should be very sorry to interfere with any family arrangements," said Glanfield; "but, if you could make it

convenient to leave us behind with the ladies, I think it would be pleasanter for all concerned."

"I knew Hammerton was a scoundrel," exclaimed Wheldrake, "but I would never have believed this of him."

"I shall leave you behind, Mr. Glanfield, but I am afraid you will not much lighten the dulness of the ladies. Brigandage has its obligations, and would be a trade of very little use if it were not respected. Communication with the police is death by the law of the mountain. If that law were not strictly kept the arranging of ransoms would be impossible."

"But," cried Wheldrake, "this money is raised, we know!"

"How?" said Patroceni, briefly, as his dark eyes looked through the speaker.

"You duffer!" muttered Glanfield.

Wheldrake hesitated, looked confused, and eventually said: "We have every reason to believe that arrangement to be satisfactorily concluded."

"Mr. Wheldrake," rejoined the Count, "you are either making a statement for which you have no grounds, or you are in communication with Naples. Having invariably found you an upright, honourable man, I have no doubt that my latter theory is the correct one. This makes my situation so much more complicated. Gentlemen, I will wish you good-night now, and regret that necessity will compel me to wish you a permanent adieu at daybreak. Make your peace with Heaven to-night, and believe me that any last wishes you may express will be most scrupulously attended to. Once more, good night! Conduct these gentlemen to their tents, Sarini." And with a bow that would have done no discredit to a throne-room the Count dismissed his unfortunate guests.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

LAST WORDS.

"To die at daybreak." It is not as a rule that, except through the mouth of her Majesty's judges, this sentence is dealt out to us. Regarded theoretically those four words do not carry much weight. The assault will take place at daybreak; if it makes the pulses of the soldier beat quicker it carries no presage of his impending fate. There is promotion, the V.C., and the chance of exceptional honours before him, and in the hot tide of battle who recks that he may be numbered amongst the slain? But the words "To die at daybreak" assume a very different aspect when you know there is nothing to interfere between you and implacable fate, and at sunrise you are to take your last look upon this earth of ours and sink without a struggle into the grave which destiny has awarded you.

A grim prospect this for the few short hours that remain. No time now to right that tangled web we most of us make of our lives. Sins, follies, errors of judgment, must, such as they are, be left standing on the record against us. No time left to us to put right these miserable mistakes of our career. We are to die at daybreak! Only a few hours left in which to endeavour to repair such wrongdoing as may lay heavy on our soul.

Wheldrake and Glanfield were not troubled with remorse or compunctions of this nature. They were both men who had lived their careless lives honestly and straightly, according to their lights. If they were to die it was through no fault of their own. To say they could conscientiously show a blameless record would be to claim for them what no men of the world like themselves could possibly produce; but both of them could say with a clear conscience that neither man nor woman was the worse for having known them.

"It looks ugly, old man," said Glanfield, as, upon regaining their tent, he lit a cigar. "Unless something turns up in our favour I fancy that ungrateful beggar really does mean shooting us at daybreak. By Jove! only to think that not a twelvemonth ago, when we shot the Hangers, I could have forestalled him, and rolled him over like a rabbit—by mistake."

"Yes," replied Wheldrake; "there's no jesting about the Count, you may depend upon it. Whether Hammerton has really played false to us or not is of very little consequence. Patroceni thinks he has, and that's enough to determine our fate. Well, it's rather hard. Three or four weeks ago I think I should have rather welcomed the ending; but then, you see, I hadn't again met Maude. I had no idea she still loved me. The world to me was a blank, and I cared not how soon I was quit of it. Now everything is different. I know I still hold her heart. Life once more opens before me, and I am loth to leave it."

"Ah! it's not such a bad sort of place, you know. I've always found it good enough for me. A little depressing, perhaps, when all your fancies at Ascot and Newmarket persistently run second; when the sporting papers on the Saturday clearly demonstrate they ought to have won if such-and-such had taken place, and you only know they didn't, and there's a lot to pay on Monday. There! it's all very well, Cyril; I am trying to take the most gloomy view I can of it, because our places seem booked by this train, and it's no use making faces over it."

"No, Jim," rejoined Wheldrake; "like most Englishmen I suppose we know how to die now our time has come. But there's one thing—I should like to say good-bye to Maude. And, though they mean shooting us at daybreak, I don't suppose our captors will object to that. You, also, I should think, would like to take leave of her."

"Yes, of course," rejoined Glanfield, as he emitted a heavy cloud of smoke from beneath his moustache, "I should like

to do that. Don't want to interfere with your good-bye, you know, old fellow. I should like to shake hands, too, with Mrs. Fullerton. We're old friends, you know. Yes, very old friends; and it would be ——" and here Jim took his cigar from his lips, and there seemed something wrong in the rolling of that tobacco which required immediate seeing to. "Yes, old friends," he continued; "she is a fine woman, Mrs. Fullerton, and a deuced nice woman, too; and it would be a polite attention, you know, to say good-bye."

"It is merely asking our gaoler's permission, I fancy," said Wheldrake; and, going to the door of the tent, he requested the sentry to pass the word for Sarini. That worthy quickly made his appearance, and, upon learning their request, acceded to it at once.

"Certainly, signors; I regret as much as his Excellency that the treachery of a friend consigns you to the tomb. The fortune of war, my friends—and something may intervene even now, signors, to save you. I have been half-a-dozen times as near my end as you are apparently, and seen many a year roll by since. Any liberty you like to-night, signors; but remember, attempting to pass the sentries is merely anticipating the morning."

"You need fear nothing of that sort," rejoined Wheldrake. "We regard escape as much too hopeless an enterprise to be worth attempting. We only wish to say good-bye to the friends we are so soon to leave behind us."

"I will send word to the ladies," rejoined Sarini, with a low bow. "It is a glorious night, and the plateau will be pleasant. Lives, Signor Wheldrake, must give way to circumstances. But believe me when I say that I am sorry circumstances compel his Excellency to sacrifice yours. Ah! continued this philosopher, "another shake of the dice-box and Patroceni and I will probably change places with you."

"I say," said Glanfield, as Sarini left the tent, "this is all devilish fine, you know; but if there's one thing that I hate on leaving a country-house it's the saying 'Good-bye.'

It's awful awkward, you know. If you say too much about what a good time you've had—looks as if you were fishing for an invitation to be asked there again; and, if you take the other line, then I always picture 'em while I'm on my way to the station as saying, 'Cantankerous beast! I suppose there was nothing here good enough for him.' No, Cyril, you needn't smile; there's nothing to grin about in being shot at daybreak, and there is nothing very jocular in saying good-bye to people——well, people you care about, for a precious indefinite period."

"Come along," said Wheldrake, "it's no use straw-splitting like this. I'm going to have a last talk with Maude; as for you, I daresay you will find plenty to say when you once see the woman who you're head-over-ears in love with, and who is just as much in love with you, whenever you can manage to bring that little explanation about."

"Mrs. Fullerton in love with me!" exclaimed Glanfield.

"Yes," said Cyril, quietly; "she only wants to be assured of your love to own it; but perhaps, standing as we do on the brink of the grave, you have no business to tell it. Come along;" and the two slipped out into the moonlight, where already the flutter of the ladies' dresses was visible.

"I am so pleased to see you, Cyril," said Maude, quietly. "Have you any news from Naples? Papa is getting so fidgety and uneasy. He has taken it into his head that my cousin Fred is playing us false."

"Yes, my dear Maude," rejoined Wheldrake; "and, what is still worse, Patroceni has taken the same idea into his head."

"You don't mean that?" cried the girl, eagerly. "Will it endanger our position here, do you think?"

"I don't know," replied Wheldrake, quietly. "It means that Jim and I have got to leave you for a little."

"Leave us! Good heavens, Cyril, what do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. No prudent man puts all his eggs

into one basket. I suppose we represent, in some shape, stocks, shares, what you will, to these scoundrels. They don't mean to keep all their prisoners in one place."

"And where are they going to send you?" cried Maude, breathless with excitement.

"Well, I don't know," rejoined Cyril, quietly. "But it will be a good way from here. I shall be saying good-bye to you now for many a long day."

"Long day!" cried the girl excitedly, as she clasped his arm. "What is it you mean, Cyril? Tell me the truth at once."

"Really, Mr. Glanfield, those two are getting a little too lover-like to desire supervision. I can shut my eyes as close as any chaperone in Europe, but I know when it is time to turn my back—and don't you think, Mr. Glanfield, it is time now?" and with these words the widow turned on her heel and led the way towards the other end of the plateau.

Glanfield walked by her side as they paced away from the other two still talking in the moonlight.

"What does Mr. Wheldrake mean?" inquired the widow, sharply, the moment they were out of earshot. "There is surely nothing serious threatening? You are both going away. When? why? where?"

"Don't know exactly where," rejoined Glanfield. "Why—because it suits Count Patroceni to send us there. When—at daybreak to-morrow morning. Now, Mrs. Fullerton, you know all that I can tell you."

She looked at him for a few minutes and then replied quietly, "I perhaps know all you will tell me, but by no means all you can. There is nothing wrong about the ransom, is there?"

"Don't suppose so," said Glanfield. "Hammerton's not written—couldn't perhaps. Post here a little irregular, you see."

A somewhat similar scene was taking place about twenty paces from them.

"Cyril," said Maude, in a low whisper, the moment the others were well out of hearing, "you are not telling me the truth. What is the meaning of going away?—what is the meaning of our not meeting for ever so long? Surely you don't think that this terrible Count can meditate such crimes as men in his profession too often resort to? He is not—not—threatening the lives of you and Mr. Glanfield, is he? Let me see him, if it is so. He must listen to a woman; he must know, when it is pointed out to him, that it will be sheer madness to take the lives of any of us—that my father will pay only to save the lives of all of us. And Cyril, dearest, it might be well he should know that if he kills you my father need pay no ransom for me."

"It is no use being frightened, darling. You have guessed so much that I won't disguise from you that the Count has been rather lavish of threats this afternoon; and rather lavish of his wine too apparently," he continued, as the boisterous laughter of the brigands, carousing upon the edge of the wood, fell upon their ears. "I'll be honest with you, Maude. Patroceni is anxious, because he thinks your cousin Fred is in communication with the police. We run no danger unless that is the case."

"Oh, Cyril, Cyril! and it was to please me—it was to save my cousin from possible danger—that you changed places with him. Oh! my God. What shall I do?" And the girl threw her hands to her temples. "I, who would give my life's blood for you, am about to become your murderess;" and, snatching his hand, Maude fell at Wheldrake's feet, in a perfect storm of sobs. He raised her in a moment, and, clasping her in his arms, kissed away the tears.

"You have no right to say such things," he exclaimed at last; "the whole thing seems to me to be a puzzle. I have

no reason—goodness knows—to think well of Fred Hammerton; but I do not believe him such a scoundrel as this would prove him to be. The whole thing is a bit of a puzzle; but I fancy it will come out all right in the end. You must not cry for me yet, Maude. Gentry like these, whose hospitality we are enjoying, are wont to get a little fidgety about the bill, more especially when there is some slight delay in paying it. Don't fret, my darling. It is quite possible Glanfield and myself will not be sent away to-morrow morning after all."

The girl looked up into his face in the moonlight, and scanned it eagerly to see if he were keeping aught back from her; but his quiet tranquillity baffled her; and she dropped her eyes after a minute with a quiet assurance that if he and Mr. Glanfield were going away to-morrow morning it was only that they were to be confided to stricter custody.

Mrs. Fullerton had paced up and down for some time by the side of her escort in silence. As for Jim Glanfield he said nothing, deeming it much the safest thing to do, under the circumstances. He was the last man in the world to make any parade of what he would term "an awkward fix" to any lady. If he was to die, well and good; those who were sorry might shed tears for him afterwards, but he was not going to have any drenching of pocket-handkerchiefs in anticipation. He most decidedly had no desire to quit this world, and thought, vindictively, could he but have forecast things, that he would have had a *gun accident* that day they shot the Hangers, and cut short the line of the Patrocenis.

"Now, Mr. Glanfield," suddenly exclaimed the widow, abruptly, "you are going away at daybreak. No more fencing, if you please. Where? This monster does not menace murder, does he?"

"Well, you see, these fellows always do; it's part of their business, you know. If the flies that get into their webs don't happen to shell out freely and shortly they threaten

them with extinction. All pure bunkum, of course. A man pays as high as he can for his life, but you can't reckon upon his heirs paying a fancy price for his remains."

"Mr. Glanfield, how can you talk in such a dreadful manner?" said the widow, beginning to whimper, and putting her pocket-handkerchief to her eyes. "If—if—you can afford to make a jest of such a thing, you might remember other people have feelings. You might remember that we have likings and dislikings; and bear in mind that when those we love—I mean, like—are in danger, we don't, that is we do, feel very unhappy about it." And here Mrs. Fullerton commenced sobbing in good earnest.

"No; don't do that, you dear little woman, there's nothing to cry about." And here, as Glanfield said afterwards, he never quite understood how it happened, but his arm got round the widow's waist and he found himself kissing away her tears and protesting that he could not afford to give up life at present, as a new interest in it had suddenly dawned upon him.

But the tenderest love-tale must finish at last, and a self-contained man like Glanfield was under no circumstances likely to be very diffusive. It might be questioned whether a man doomed to die at daybreak had any right to speak such words, but men bound for dangerous enterprises have often unburthened their hearts in this wise, much as it might look as if nothing ever came of it. Mrs. Fullerton, having released herself, and finding her lover wax taciturn, began to think it was time to retire and exult over her conquest.

"I shall feel dreadfully uneasy," she said, "till I know this money is paid. I think it can only mean that Count Patroceni is determined to put on still further pressure. It will be an anxious time for all of us until the next few days are over. Meanwhile, Maude and I must retire. Sir Jasper betook himself to rest an hour ago."

Maude turned at her aunt's summons, and the two men

escorted the ladies to the door of the hut. It was no time for conventional partings, but Mrs. Fullerton was just a little surprised when Wheldrake kissed her as he bade her farewell.

CHAPTER XLIX.

HOW SOUND ARE THEIR SLUMBERS.

Forty-eight hours after Hammerton's interview with the Count he received a visit from Chisel. The valet had occasionally called before to know if there was any news of his master, and, upon this occasion, he sent up not only his name but a note to say that his business was urgent. Hammerton ordered him to be shown up, and Chisel said at once:—

"I am afraid, Captain Hammerton, there is mischief brewing. You know, sir, before you arrived in Naples I had been urging the police to search for my master; but after you told me that I was endangering his life by so doing I never went near them. Well, sir, there was one of the subordinates there, who spoke a few words of English, who used to be very civil to me, and he promised to let me know when they heard of anything. He came down this morning to see me, and told me I should soon see my master now, as the police had sent a great expedition, headed by about the cleverest man amongst them, to capture Patroceni and all his band; and when I hinted that Count Patroceni, by all accounts, was a hardish nut to crack, he told me their men were in such force as to make any resistance on the part of the brigands hopeless."

"The fools! the madmen!" exclaimed Hammerton; "the brigands are much too alert, and know the country much too well, to be surprised by the gendarmerie. The sole result

of their interference will be the murder of the prisoners. There is only one thing for it; I must get a hack, and make my way thither as quickly as possible," and Hammerton at once rang the bell and gave the necessary order to the attendant.

"Pleasant this," he thought. "If I do not get there before the police I shall naturally be regarded both by Patroceni and his prisoners as their betrayer. I played Wheldrake a pretty scurvy trick that night at Wrottsley, but then he stood between me and thirty thousand pounds. Since then he has risked his life for mine; and I can't let him nor the others die with the belief that their blood is on my head. No; if horseflesh and my legs can do it I must be on that plateau before the police."

In vain did Chisel beg for leave to accompany him. Hammerton curtly refused that request. "No," he said; "one man will attract less attention. I will go alone; but remember if I should not return you will bear witness that I never went near the police, but did my very best to prevent the catastrophe of their coming."

Another minute and Hammerton was in the saddle, and speeding as fast as his horse could carry him upon the road to Pompeii. As he passed through it he noticed that there were no gendarmes about, and he had heard at Naples for some days past there had been a strong post of them there, for the purpose of patrolling the road to Amalfi. Yes; he had no doubt that Chisel's information was true, and that all these men were now moving up to surprise Patroceni's camp. He continued to push on as quickly as possible, showing very little mercy to the horse he was riding. He had diverged now from the high road, and was making his way across the hills towards the dark woods he could see in the distance. At last he reached the shepherd's hut, where Wheldrake had slept with his captors on his way to the camp. There he was confronted by Giovanni. The bandit had paused for a short rest, and was

engaged in conversation with two or three comrades who were there, as a sort of outlying picket. They were listening intently to the news that Giovanni brought. No sooner did the bandit catch sight of Hammerton than he arose and advanced towards him in a threatening manner; but the Captain throwing up his hands in sign of amity, and being moreover quite unarmed, the ruffian withdrew his hand from his poignard. In his broken Italian Hammerton succeeded in making Giovanni understand that he had urgent business with the Count, and then again one of the *soi-disant* shepherds recognised the Captain as having lately been one of his Excellency's visitors: so, taking into consideration that he was unarmed and alone, Giovanni thought there would be no harm in acceding to Hammerton's request that he should accompany him to the camp. That bandit was soon ready to start again, and they pushed forward on what was the more intricate part of their journey.

It soon became evident that the Englishman was far the fresher of the two men. In the first place he had led a far healthier life of late than Giovanni; and in the second place the bandit was weighted besides with the effects of the serious illness that had followed upon the results of Patroceni's rough treatment. Then again Hammerton had come all the first part of his journey on horseback, not having abandoned his cruelly-gruelled hack till reaching that hut. Those elaborate luncheons at the "Golden Bush" began to tell their tale on the hill-side, and the brawny bandit drew his breath with many a sob. Hammerton cast impatient glances at his companion and urged upon him the necessity of greater speed.

"It is of no use!" gasped the bandit. "*I* can go no quicker. I am pretty near finished as it is."

"But the case is urgent," rejoined Hammerton. "The police are on our heels, and the Count and your comrades must have warning."

"Push on by yourself, then!" cried the panting Giovanni.

"I tell you again I can go no quicker and am nearly worn out. Surely the road is clear enough to you now."

"Point it out," answered Hammerton, briefly.

"You see that stunted tree to the right," rejoined Giovanni, stopping and throwing himself on the ground; "keep just inside that. You can see the edge of the woods already. When you are past the tree keep as straight for them as you can, bearing, if anything, a trifle to the right. When you near them look for a big boulder. There are several smaller scattered about, all of the same size; but you must look for one double the size of its fellows. Just behind that you will find a narrow path through the woods. You can hardly mistake your way, and when you come to the spring turn to your left, and in a couple of hundred yards or so you will hit the brook; follow that upwards, and it will lead you into the camp."

All this took some little time to explain, and when Hammerton was about to start again Giovanni sprang to his feet and protested that he would go with him, but it was an expiring effort. Before he had proceeded a quarter of a mile his endeavours to keep pace with his companion had completely exhausted him. He once more threw himself on the ground and cried, "Go on, never mind me. One caution only—answer pretty quickly when challenged, for our people are apt to be pretty handy with their guns to night-visitors."

Hammerton pushed steadily forward until he came to the boulders. It took him some few minutes to find the king-stone. That found he speedily discovered the path Giovanni had described, and pursued it at his best pace till he came to the spring. By this time it had grown so dark that he was afraid to leave it, and sat himself down by its side till the moon should have risen a little higher in the heavens. According to his directions he should now leave the path and penetrate through some two hundred yards of wood until he hit the stream. But without a little more light it was very easy to get turned round and lose all knowledge of the

compass in that short distance, so he wisely determined to remain where he was.

Fatigued with his exertion, he stretched himself by the spring, and in a few minutes fell asleep. About the time that Wheldrake and Glanfield were bidding a last good-bye on the plateau to the women they loved, and walking back to their tent to make their grim final preparations, incumbent as a rule on men doomed to die at daybreak, Hammerton stretched himself and awoke. The moon shone gorgeously by this, and he had now little difficulty in striking the brook. In accordance with his directions he followed it upwards, but had not gone twenty paces before he became aware of a man leaning his back against a tree, and apparently buried in profound slumber. His gun lay on the ground by his side, and his arms hung loose and nerveless across his body. He advanced cautiously towards him, but the man showed no signs of awaking, and speedily he jumped to the conclusion that this was one of the cordon of sentries, whom slumber had overtaken. What should he do? To pass him might be dangerous. To awake him were more so. There is a proverb about "letting sleeping dogs lie," but Hammerton thought his presence within the sentries, unless duly announced, might be more perilous. He decided to awake him. Getting between the man and his gun, he put his hand quietly on his shoulder. He slept on unconsciously. He shook him, but still, so sound was his slumber, without effect. Suddenly a thought flashed across him. Could he be dead? He tore open his jacket, placed his hand to his heart, and his ear to his mouth. No; the heart beat steadily, if feebly, and the breath came regular, if low. It was like the discovery of one of the seven sleepers. Slowly following the stream, in about another hundred yards Hammerton came to another brigand in like case with his comrade. He shook him similarly, but with no effect. What could it all mean? A little further, and he came to the stones that crossed the brooklet. He passed to the other side, and found himself in the midst

of a group of a dozen or fourteen bandits buried in slumber so profound that not one of them moved a finger at his presence amongst them. He made his way quietly to the plateau, and, pausing for a moment under the shadow of the wood, considered what he had better do. He knew these men were fond of wine, but it was impossible they could all be so utterly overcome as this by any ordinary drinking-bout. The best thing he could do, he thought, was to go boldly across the plateau straight to Patroceni's tent. He moved. Just as he was about to step forward a footstep on the turf, at his side, made him start, and, before he could well distinguish the new comer, a strong hand gripped him by the throat, and he felt the cold barrel of a pistol pressed against his temples.

CHAPTER L.

DEATH OF GIOVANNI.

"You had better go quietly, signor, for I am in little mood to be trifled with. Make the slightest resistance and you will die."

"I have no intention of making any resistance," replied Hammerton, quietly comprehending Sarini's speech, more by his action than his words.

"You will come, then, to his Excellency;" and Sarini, assured that his prisoner meant no resistance, released his grip, with the comforting assurance that he would shoot him at the slightest sign of any endeavour to escape.

They traversed the plateau rapidly, and in a few moments stopped at the door of Patroceni's tent. Still keeping a vigilant eye on his prisoner, Sarini sharply called:

"Your Excellency! Your Excellency!"

The Count was a light sleeper, and in a moment he appeared at the door, already dressed.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"We knew that we were betrayed; but the enemies are rather closer to us than we thought. Our fellows are all drunk. I have just been round the camp for the second time to-night, and there is no rousing them. I can't understand it. They were drinking when I went my rounds the first time; and I cautioned them that there were hawks abroad, and they were to have a care not to drink too deeply. Two or three of them might have forgotten the caution; but I cannot understand their all being in such a state of utter insensibility."

"Captain Hammerton," said the Count, sharply; "you've been rash to venture once more into the tiger's den. We agreed once before that you would not stick at trifles to lay your hand upon thirty thousand pounds. It is a bold game; but it's like to be a fatal one to you. Well thought out; well thought out! Win your cousin's hand or not, Sir Jasper was bound to do something pretty liberal for the man who dared so much to save him thirty thousand pounds."

"You mistake me, altogether, Count. I have risked my life, I know. Risked it not to keep faith with you, but for the sake of those whose lives you hold in your hand."

"Thanks for your information," sneered the Count. "I discovered that for myself when I had the pleasure of seeing you in Naples. Even conversed with the police-spy, who is fool enough to think that he has circumvented Patroceni. Come to warn me, forsooth! You have come with the police at your heels. Hold, Sarini! I will go round for myself. You will take care of our enterprising friend here. If he moves a finger you will know what to do," and the Count rapidly crossed the plateau. He came first to the sleeping group, opposite the stepping-stones of the brook. He looked around at the scene of the revel—half empty wine-flasks, tin pannikins in which the liquor still stood.

Patroceni shook two of the sleepers. "As I thought," he muttered. Then, stooping down, he raised one of the half-

filled pannikins to his lips and tasted it. Again he rinsed his mouth with the contents, then spat it cautiously out on the grass.

"*Drugged!* And pretty stiffly too. A clever plant. That agent of police who planned this *coup* is rather cleverer than I gave him credit for. How did he get his wine into the camp?" And pondering over that problem the Count crossed the stream, and proceeded further down the opposite bank. He came one after the other to the sentries that Hammerton had passed, and striking across to the spring followed the track towards the boulders some little distance. He listened attentively for quite ten minutes, but no sound reached his ear, save the faint rustling of the trees.

Then Patroceni turned back, and rapidly went round amongst his men; he found them all more or less senseless. Some of them indeed, when shaken, awoke for two or three minutes, and made some attempt to rise; but the fatal lethargy soon overtook them again, and they sank back to resume their disturbed slumbers. Some there were who were no more to be roused from their insensibility than so many corpses. A frightful imprecation escaped Patroceni's lips as he recognised the crafty treachery that had been practised on him, and he made his way back to his tent in a frame of mind that boded small mercy for his prisoners.

He entered the tent where Sarini, pistol in hand, was keeping grim watch upon his captive.

"It is as you said," he exclaimed; "treachery foul and ingenious has been practised on us. Captain Hammerton, if you would make your peace with the Church you had best do it to-night. You will die with your comrades at daybreak."

"I have been fool enough," rejoined Hammerton, "to do my best to warn you of the approach of the police. I suppose I shall pay the penalty for having tried to behave honestly to you for once. There is one thing, Count, make no mistake about it, whatever blood you shed here is likely

to be speedily avenged. I know the state of your followers, and once more warn you, as I did before, that the police will be upon you before many hours have passed. Fly! leave us, and trust to me that the money shall be paid, wherever you choose to name."

"Trust to you!" interposed Patroceni, scornfully; "it would argue much want of intelligence if I did. No. Your plan was ingenious, but Sarini and myself are old conspirators. I do not intend you should live to enjoy the profits of your treachery. There will be little fear," he continued with a sneer, "of your imitating Iscariot *now*. The ending of *his* history is just the part you would omit;" and as he finished the Count made a sign to his lieutenant, who promptly pinioned Hammerton's arms from behind.

"Don't struggle," said Patroceni; "we are two armed and determined men, and, of course, can kill you now if we wish to. It is better to wait a few hours, and see whether luck may not turn in your favour. In the meantime, when the prisoners outnumber the garrison, it is only common prudence to bind them." And in another minute or two Hammerton found his arms pinioned behind his back. That done, the Count pointed to his bed, and bade him take the rest he must require. Tired and worn out as he was, in spite of the discomfiture of his bonds, Hammerton was soon asleep.

Giovanni, in the meanwhile, after a short nap, in some measure recovered from his fatigue, pushed rapidly forward, passed the boulders, followed the track up to the fountain, struck off through the wood, and, as Hammerton had done some two hours before him, came to the first sentry on the brook. Like Hammerton, he was astounded at the stupor in which he found him, and his amazement was still further increased by discovering the next in pretty much the same state. But when he had crossed the brook his astonishment knew no bounds. He gazed critically at the relics of the revel, and a fear came over him as the insensible forms of

his comrades met his eye. Giovanni could certainly claim to be a judge of drunkenness in all its phases; but, as he shook first one and then another of his fellows, and failed to rouse them from their heavy trance, a feeling of terror came over him. "This is not drunkenness," he muttered, turning white almost to his lips, and kneeling down by the prostrate form of his old friend Pietro. "Santo Diavolo! they are poisoned!" Once more he looked around, and a wine-flask at Pietro's side met his eye. He raised it, and, under any other circumstances, would, probably, have swallowed the remainder of its contents; as it was, he gazed at it curiously, and promptly recognised that it was one of that pattern of which the Signor Stein had been so lavish. He understood it now. Pietro had invited his comrades to have a bout over the last basket that he, Giovanni, had forwarded. Merciful heavens! that wine must have been poisoned. That villainous old man had dealt with his brethren as if they were rats.

He sank on his knees in the extremity of his terror. This man—whose life had been stained with crime, who had only recently committed a double murder—now cowered in unutterable horror at the thought of having been, though unwittingly, the destroyer of all his companions.

"They were good to me, some of them," he muttered. "If it had not been for Pietro and two or three more I should not be alive to poison men like rats. I have slain more than one in my time, but it was by bullet or steel. I never sent one to his grave in such cowardly fashion as this. Holy Virgin! the place will haunt me. I shall see it in my dreams, and their ghosts will point and gibber at me from the brookside here. I, who have broke bread and drank with them, to poison their wine-cup!" and the terrified man literally grovelled on the ground at the idea of the death-plague he had scattered round him. "Are they all dead?" he murmured. "Surely his Excellency did not touch it. And Signor Sarini? He must be alive. What am I to do?

I dare not go forward, the way seems strewn with corpses; as if Matteo and that miserable woman were not enough to see in the night-time. He died hard, did Matteo; but it served him right. No fault of his he did not cause my death. I did his, and, coward as he was, how he fought! But I was mad with drink that night, and my eyes red with blood. I'd have killed him had he been twice as strong. And that fool of a woman; what impelled her to come upon the tiger just as he had struck down his quarry? Well, she died too!"

He uttered the last words half-unconsciously aloud. A mocking voice promptly answered him.

"Don't fret yourself on that point, Giovanni. You are about to follow them." And himself on his knees, the bandit saw his chief standing a few paces from him, with his pistol levelled at his head. "This, you scoundrel, is, I presume, your work. I saw you myself at Naples in close conversation with the police. It is through your means they have introduced this half-poisoned stuff into the camp, whereby you consign the whole of your comrades to the grave or the galleys. It was foolish of me to give you such a slight chance for your life as I gave you last time. I might have known if you lived I should repent it. Don't think I am going to make that mistake again."

"You saw me in Naples, Excellency?" stammered Giovanni.

"Yes. You've not forgotten the 'Golden Bush,' I should think. Perhaps you remember the dumb pedlar, who sat at the next table to you at luncheon. I was that pedlar, and the man you were lunching with was a poliee-agent. Quick! Your time is short. Was it not you sent this wine?"

"Yes, your Excellency; but I knew not that it was anything but good wine."

Giovanni was much less terrified at the wrath of his chief than at the phantoms his imagination had conjured up just before.

"And that pleasant old gentleman with the spectacles gave it you to send, I suppose?"

"*Si, Eccellenza,*" replied Giovanni.

"Then go as herald to those whom your drunken stupidity has doomed to destruction," and as he finished the Count's revolver cracked, sharp and shrill, and Giovanni had preceded his comrades across the Styx. "There will be no resurrection this time." The Count's bullet had sped straight and true, and Giovanni fell back, shot through the heart.

CHAPTER LI.

LEROUX ARRIVES AT THE PLATEAU.

As Giovanni rolled over a veritable corpse among so many apparent ones, Leroux with his men had reached the edge of the woods. There he halted his main body while with his scouts he sought for the path, of whose existence he was now aware. From one or two frightened peasants whom he had made prisoners on the way he had extracted a very fair idea of the road to Patroceni's retreat. He had made no mistake so far, but it was just this last bit through the woods that was difficult to follow without a guide. There was a delay of some time before the scouts discovered it, and the moonlight was waning when he finally plunged amid the trees.

The most dangerous part of his enterprise had now commenced; the narrow path only permitted of their proceeding two abreast. The dark hour before the morn was approaching, and they were liable to be attacked by invisible foes at almost any moment. Leroux fancied he had heard a shot when they first came up to the woods, but it was so faint and far away that he could not be sure. The report of a revolver does not echo very far. Slowly and cautiously they made

their way along—finger on trigger, and with eyes peering into the darkness. Leroux led the way in person. The wine might or might not have done its work. Such a wary old fox as Patroceni might have discovered this hamper coming into his camp, and would be certain to examine it. At last they arrived at the fountain. There the path apparently ended, as the police-agent had been correctly informed it would. Leroux knew now that he was very near the brigands' camp, and that the greatest caution and complete silence were absolutely necessary. It had now become so very dark that Leroux determined to wait for daybreak. He was quite tactician enough to know that he could not utilise his superiority in numbers except in the open. A very inferior force, knowing the ground and attacking him here amongst the trees, would be quite on an equality with him. He calculated that the first streaks of grey would appear in the sky in half-an-hour. As soon as it was fairly light—that is, in about an hour—he would feel his way to the brook, collect his men on the edge of it, and then make a bold rush at the plateau. If the drugged wine had been partaken of the work would be easy, but it was hardly likely that so noted a bandit as Patroceni would be taken without some bloodshed. It could hardly be hoped that he, as well as all his men, would have fallen into the insidious trap that had been laid for them. Having enjoined the strictest silence on all his followers, Leroux sat quietly down by the fountain to wait for the light.

Leaving the police-agent and his men bivouacking by the fountain, we must now look back upon what is happening in the camp.

After the death of Giovanni the Count and Sarini walked quietly back to the former's tent.

"We must leave this at daybreak," he said; "it's the cleverest snare that ever was set for me. I shall make an example before I go. The police must be made to understand that brigandage is a profession not to be rashly

meddled with. There are too many political exiles dependent upon it for a living."

"Are all the men to die, Excellency?"

"No, I think not. We will give Sir Jasper and his old fool of a butler their lives. They will be some consolation to the women until the police come up. They will be here most likely as the day wears on. Of the two men who have betrayed us one has died, the other expiates his treachery at sunrise. The Signors Glanfield and Wheldrake, I regret it, but they must suffer as examples in accordance with the law of the mountains. But, Sarini, we must not forget that there are only our two selves now to administer justice. Don't think me a stickler for etiquette, my old comrade, but you know in the ordinary way we should have paraded the three culprits in a row, bandaged their eyes, unless they professed to be able to look into the levelled carbines without blenching, and shot them in orthodox fashion. As it is we must first of all dispose of Hammerton, and we must deal with the other two in less military fashion. Even when unarmed I have seen men think it worth while to make a throw for their lives, and that there are only two of us might encourage these perverse Englishmen to attempt such folly."

"It will make very little difference, Excellency. It may give a little more trouble; and if you and I can't deal as we list with a couple of unarmed men then the training of years goes for nought. Our nerves are little likely to fail us at the sight of some slight difficulty."

"True; and now off with you! We've time to spare yet, and I've some few preparations to make here before we start."

Could Patroceni have heard the conversation carried on in an undertone in the adjoining tent he might have been confirmed in his opinion that these perverse Englishmen were likely to give trouble. Glanfield had been roused from a fitful slumber by the report of Patroceni's pistol. He at once shook his companion.

"Did you hear that?" he said. "It was a shot close to the camp. Of course, it may mean anything. It may mean that one of our drunken captors has discharged his gun by accident; it may mean that one of their sentries has mistaken a bush for a police-officer; it might be that most dangerous of all things—soldiers advancing to release us. It is not likely; but there may be a turn-up in our favour before to-morrow. We are not struck out of all engagements yet."

"Not quite yet, Jim," replied Wheldrake, with a faint smile. "Such a very few weeks back and I would have cared so little if it were so; but it seems hard now. Life looks so rosy before one. I am assured of Maude's love. I have only, on my return to England, to find Hammerton's confederate to clear my good name. That should be easy. Yes, life is sweet to me! it is bitter to die now."

Glanfield put his glass in his eye, and leisurely surveyed his companion for a moment.

"Shake hands, old fellow!" he said. "Those are about my feelings, only I should have expressed it as a deuce of a sell. I'll tell you what, Cyril—I don't see why we shouldn't strike a blow for our lives, if we see a chance."

"We are more morally fettered, Jim, than if we were bound hand and foot. The slightest attempt of that kind might cost the lives of those very dear to us. A more ruthless tiger than Patroceni, in spite of all his purring, never existed. Let his prey escape him, and he will rend all within his reach. No, it's hard; but we must die quietly."

"Don't be afraid but what I'll die quietly enough if it comes to that," replied Glanfield, doggedly; "but if I see a twenty-to-one chance for our lives I mean to take it. Even Patroceni would never be tiger enough to harm our sweethearts; and don't you think they would bid us strike a blow to save ourselves if we got a fair chance?"

"You have no business to endanger their safety," replied Wheldrake, sternly.

"There is no use quarreling over it," replied Glanfield. "I am not going to do anything rash; and it is long odds against my getting a chance to do anything at all. But, remember, if I do holloa to you, you can stand out of it, or not, as you like; but you will see a fight."

Wheldrake made no reply, but threw himself moodily on the bed.

The faintest streak of dawn could be first seen in the sky from the plateau, invisible to Leroux and his men amongst the woods. But the police-agent had become restless, and whispered to the captain of the gendarmerie acting under his orders to remain where he was whilst he crept a little way forward to explore. He took two or three of his own men with him, and then carefully taking his bearings started in the direction of the brook. At an interval of about fifty paces he dropped a man to ensure his being able to find his way back, with instructions to reply immediately to a low whistle. He was surprisingly fortunate: for by the time he had dropped his last man he had hit off the brook. Cautiously he crept along its bank until he came to that first insensible sentry.

Leroux's pulses tingled. The man seemed sound asleep; —how sound? Could this be the first of his victims? Drawing a poignard from his breast he advanced stealthily to the sleeper's side. He slept soundly, but he must know how soundly.

Gripping his dagger close he placed his hand upon his shoulder. It was well for that sleeper he had drank deeply of the cup. Had he suddenly displayed active animation Leroux's poignard would have been buried in his breast. But no; he was senseless as the tree against which he leaned. Leroux shook him roughly, and still he moved not. Then the police-agent uttered a low laugh, and, turning on his heel, wended his way quietly back to his men. Leaving

the scouts he had placed where they were, no sooner did Leroux reach the fountain than, placing himself at the head of his party, he gave the word to move on, and rapidly led them to the banks of the stream, cautiously preceding them a few yards. Quietly they crept along the bank, the police-agent as he passed the insensible sentry signing to his men to bind him. When they came to the second Leroux's heart beat high. No doubt now that his stratagem had succeeded! Quietly he made his way till he came to the stepping-stones; then he crossed. It was daybreak on the plateau, and as he cleared the brook which ran along the extreme edge of the wood he came across the scene of that fatal revel, fatal in appearance as that of the famous banquet of the veiled Prophet of Khorassan. Leroux held up his hand as a signal for those behind him to halt, and then stepped forward to investigate affairs.

From where the brigands had held what was destined to be the final drinking-bout for most of them the ground ran with a gentle slope up to the edge of the plateau, so that a man could move about without seeing anything that was going on just above him, nor be seen from that little bit of table-land unless by some one on its edge. The wily police-agent took in the whole scene at a glance. The half-finished wine-flasks, the half-emptied pannikins, the drunken revellers strewn around, looking as if dead. "All this," muttered Leroux to himself, "the simple result of a well-administered opiate. Ah!" he said, with a low laugh, "quite a new departure in the profession—the calling-in of medical science to aid in the apprehension of criminals." But suddenly Giovanni's form caught his eye. "That one is not drugged," he muttered; "he's dead in good earnest." In a moment he was by his side, and turned up his face. "*Mon Dieu!*" he murmured, as the first fresh rays of the sun fell on the upturned features of the dead bandit, "my valued friend with the irrepressible thirst!" Quick as thought he drew back the dead man's eyelid; but the fierce light of the

savage orbs was quenched. A slight welling of blood from Giovanni's chest showed how he had come by his end. "Shot for his treachery, no doubt," mused Leroux, as he stepped quietly back to his party.

His orders were now prompt and decisive. Rapidly and noiselessly they crossed the stream, and spread themselves out under the crest of the slope, with strict orders to advance with a rush the minute Leroux gave the signal; then the police-agent crept cautiously forward, raised his head above the crest, and saw a sight that for the moment enchained him.

Standing bareheaded, with his arms pinioned behind his back, was Hammerton; and Leroux's astonishment at seeing here a man whom he believed to be in Naples was unbounded. Six paces in front of Hammerton, pistol in hand, stood the peasant whom he had taken out boating, while a second peasant was anxiously listening to what the first was saying.

CHAPTER LII.

THE LAST TRICK IS TURNED.

For an instant the police-agent was puzzled what to do. He was nearly a hundred yards away from the impending tragedy. To charge now would be to precipitate it, and yet there could be no doubt as to what Hammerton's doom would be unless intervention arrived speedily from some quarter. He was about to spring to his feet and call upon his men to follow him, when his attention was arrested by seeing a man look cautiously from out of one of the two tents which lay on the further side of the three men.

The new comer on the scene evidently grasped the situation at a glance. He bounded out of the tent, and, with a shout which fell clear enough upon Leroux's ears, of "Come

on, Cyril; I am not going to stand by and see cold-blooded murder done!" dashed across towards the group. He was much nearer to Patroceni and his victim than Leroux, and in his cricketing days there had been very few quicker men between wickets than Jim Glanfield. Patroceni knew at the first shout that the "perverse Englishmen" were refusing to meet their sentence quietly, but he never turned his head, and, raising his pistol steadily, shot Hammerton through the heart. Sarini on his part turned promptly at the sound of Glanfield's voice, and, upon seeing that his foe was close upon him with the light of battle in his eyes, fired quickly, perhaps a little too quickly, for it is certain that he missed his man; and, as he raised his pistol to fire a second shot, he was confused by seeing Wheldrake close upon his friend's heels. He hesitated for a second—fatal hesitation! for, as his finger pressed the trigger, Glanfield struck up his arm and threw himself upon him. As for Patroceni, having disposed of Hammerton, he wheeled quickly round, impassible as ever. His pistol again rang sharp and true: a stumble, a flounder or two to recover himself, and then Wheldrake fell forward on his face. A grim smile of triumph lit up the Count's features, destined to be short-lived; for, as he hurried forward to Sarini's assistance, now engaged in a grapple of life and death with Glanfield, Leroux's voice rang through the air, calling upon his men to follow him, and that they did so closely probably saved the police-agent's life.

"He has his poignard, and can take care of the Englishman by himself," muttered the Count, as he turned to confront this new danger. At a glance he saw that the police were upon him. About a dozen armed men were running towards him in a cluster as fast as they could. Patroceni's eyes sparkled; for one second he stood irresolute, and the next instant his pistol was again discharged, and one of his assailants bit the grass.

But which was their leader? That unluckily was the

thing Patroceni could not determine. Three times more did his revolver crack, and twice with fatal results. The ardour of the attacking party perceptibly cooled. With one exception they all halted; but Leroux came on with all the determination of a cheetah.

"Oh, for one more barrel!" exclaimed the Count, as he dashed his now useless pistol at the police-agent's head, and, drawing his poignard, prepared himself for the struggle. "I'll send one more fool to the other world anyhow before I'm their prisoner." In another moment Leroux had sprung at his throat like a wild cat.

They were well matched, and Leroux had not been some few years in the Neapolitan police without having taught himself the scientific use of the dagger. He dexterously caught his companion's wrist as he dashed in, only to find his own similarly pinioned before he could strike. Then it became a question of strength and endurance as to which should first free his dagger-hand. His comrades now took heart of grace and hurried to his assistance, but, ere they could interfere, the younger man had proved the stronger. Leroux wrenched his hand free, and buried his dagger in Patroceni's side.

"Habet!" murmured the bandit, as he sank to the ground, with a cynical smile on his lips.

Leroux stood for a moment breathless and triumphant, but bleeding, for, firmly as he had struggled to hold Patroceni's wrist, he had not escaped some flesh wounds.

"Quick!" he cried, looking down upon the prostrate foe; "carry him to the nearest tent, and run down to the brook for the doctor, one of you. It was a near thing for you, signor," he continued, turning to Glanfield. "I arrived too late, I fear, to save your comrades," and as he spoke he walked towards Hammerton.

Mechanically, Glanfield followed him. It needed no expert to see that Hammerton's course was run: he would never "stock cards" again. But there were others to look

to besides the dead man. No less than three of Leroux's immediate followers were stretched upon the grass, and one of these would never carry carbine more. By this time the doctor had come to Wheldrake, whom Glanfield had already picked up, and was holding in his arms. Cyril lay with his head upon his friend's shoulder, quite insensible. The doctor drew back the lids, and peered into his eyes; then rapidly tore open his shooting-jacket and waistcoat. A small wound, from which the blood was slowly welling, was distinctly visible. The doctor placed his hand on his pulse, and then said:—

"I can't say for certain till we probe the wound, but I should fancy no vital organ is touched, and that this is by no means a hopeless case. Force some spirits between his teeth if you have any here, and he will soon come to himself, at all events. Carry him into the tent at once; and now let us have a look at this one," continued the doctor, as he turned to where Sarini lay tightly bound hand and foot.

"I don't think you need trouble much about him," replied Jim. "There's nothing the matter really, and he'll be quite himself in a quarter of an hour. The beggar tried to shoot me first and knife me afterwards. But when it came to close quarters I proved the stronger, and was able to reciprocate his polite attention by nearly choking the life out of him."

Leroux had to translate this for the benefit of the Italian medico, and he had also to translate that worthy's favourable verdict regarding Wheldrake.

At this juncture Sir Jasper arrived on the scene. He, like the ladies, had been aroused by the report of firearms. It must not be supposed that the baronet had lost much time in arriving at the spot. He was sound asleep and in bed when the crack of Patroceni's revolver announced the commencement of the action, and it must be borne in mind

that the whole affair was a matter of a very few minutes. He had left Maude and Mrs. Fullerton in tears of the direst dismay, fully convinced that the butchery of their respective lovers was in progress. Nothing but the most peremptory orders on the part of Sir Jasper had prevented their rushing out on to the plateau to see what was taking place. But the baronet was very resolute on this point, and they feared to disobey. By the time Sir Jasper had tumbled into his clothes, partially pacified his sister and daughter, and stepped on to the plateau, the skirmish was over. That there had been sharp fighting he saw at a glance, and made his way rapidly towards where the little group were gathered round Sarini.

"Does anybody know who this fellow is?" inquired the police-agent. "He should be a man of mark amongst them. Dressed like a peasant though he is, it is easy to see he is not of their class. Besides, there is one distinctive peculiarity about him."

"And what is that, Signor Leroux?" inquired the doctor, inquisitively.

"Like his chief, you see," rejoined the police-agent, "he abstained from the wine. Not that for one moment I suppose he don't drink it; but the officers never frequent the same taverns as their men."

Sir Jasper had arrived in time to hear this last remark; but it being couched in Italian he was unable to understand it. Taking off his hat to Leroux he said:

"I suppose, sir, the camp is in the hands of the police, and that I have the honour of speaking to the chief of the party who has rescued us?"

"Signor Leroux, at your service," replied the police-agent, recognising at a glance that he was speaking to Sir Jasper Eversley. "Yes, the camp, Patroceni, and all his men, are in our hands, and you will be all at liberty to depart for Naples in two or three hours—in short, just as soon as pre-

parations can be made for that purpose. But it has not been altogether without some loss of life. Messrs. Hammerton and Wheldrake are, I am afraid, past all our helping."

"Hammerton?" exclaimed the baronet. "Good Heavens, how did he come here?"

"That, Sir Jasper, I have no more idea than you have. About a quarter-of-an-hour ago I thought he was safe in Naples. Now he lies there," and he pointed to the prostrate form, over which some one had already reverently thrown a cloak.

"The game is up, I suppose," said Sarini, struggling as well as his bound hands would permit him into a sitting posture. "That cursed Englishman! His hands were like a vice. They choked the very life out of me. Feel for my poignard I could not. I wanted both my hands to try and release my throat from his deadly grip. His Excellency escaped?"

"No; he is a prisoner, and badly wounded," replied Leroux.

"Are you the leader of the police?" inquired the bandit. Leroux nodded his head in the affirmative.

"It is a marvel that you are alive," said Sarini; "if it had not been for the coward's trick you paid us with the wine you would have found your task none so easy." And the bandit dropped backwards on the grass, and subsided into sullen silence.

But the feverish curiosity of the two ladies was no longer to be suppressed. As she made a hasty toilette Mrs. Fullerton announced that she must know what was going on even if she died for it.

"I declare, my hand shakes so, Maude, I cannot fasten my dress. All that firing and shouting must have meant an attack on the camp; and," she continued, dropping her voice, "something dreadful has probably happened."

"You don't think Cyril or Mr. Glanfield have been killed, do you?" said Maude, in a hoarse whisper.

"I daren't think," rejoined her aunt, as she clutched her by the wrist. "Come, we must know," and, as she spoke, Mrs. Fullerton opened the hut-door.

Leroux's quick eye was the first to catch sight of them.

"I think, signors," said he, hurriedly, "one of you had better interfere. This is hardly a fit scene for ladies. Besides, one of your party is lying dead and another badly wounded, and women are apt to get hysterical and slightly unmanageable at such sights. My own appearance, too," he remarked, glancing down at his blood-stained clothes, "is hardly reassuring."

"He is quite right, Sir Jasper," said Glanfield. "Come along, we had better speak to them at once. Not a word about Hammerton at present, remember. They suppose him safe in Naples, and will therefore feel no anxiety about him."

But no sooner did they near the hut than Maude sprang forward.

"Cyril, where is Cyril?" she exclaimed. "He is killed! I can see it in your faces."

"No, my dear Maude. I assure you he is not," replied Sir Jasper. "Wounded, but ——"

"You are not telling me the truth," interrupted Maude.

"He is nothing of the kind," interposed Glanfield, roughly; "he is wounded, but not seriously. The doctor says he'll come round all right. This will never do," he continued, as the girl showed symptoms of becoming hysterical. "We want you as soon as you have pulled yourselves together to take the nursing in hand, between you. Take her into the hut, Clara; and remember, we really want you, as soon as you've steadied your nerves a bit."

"It's quite true what he tells you," observed the baronet. "There has been some wild work, but we are free. And

Wheldrake, though wounded, is not dangerously so. You shall know all about it as soon as you have composed yourselves."

"It's very odd," said Glanfield, as he and Sir Jasper walked back towards the tent. "I can't make out how Hammerton came here; and, now I think of it, what has become of Jackson?"

The police-agent here met them. "I've just been talking to the doctor," he said. "He thinks, with care, there is no reason why Signor Wheldrake should not do well. But, for Patroceni, my dagger bit too deep. It was a life-and-death struggle, signors. One cannot be delicate with one's blows upon such an occasion. If I had not killed him he would have killed me."

Suddenly a couple of the gendarmes were seen coming towards them from the edge of the wood, with a prisoner between them. The portly butler looked perfectly dazed. His rubicund face had lost its colour, and his legs shook under him.

"We found this man," explained one of the escort, 'hiding in the wood. We presume he belongs to the English milord's party."

"Well, Jackson," exclaimed Glanfield, as the butler approached them, "you seem to have been having a lively night of it. What is the matter with you?"

"It's no use, Mr. Glanfield, I can't stand it. I'm not steeped in crime yet. I can't look on at murder and keep on anticipating my latter end. I'd sooner it came at once and was all over than go on in this way. I suppose they are going to settle us all now Such a night as I've had! Do you know, sir"—and he dropped his voice to a mysterious whisper—"that the wood is full of murdered men? That Count and his lieutenant are insatiable monsters. They must have been murdering the whole blessed night."

"What! did you see them?"

"No, Mr. Glanfield; I only saw them commit one—there was only one left alive when I got to the scene of carnage. He was a-trying to wake the other corpses. When that Count and Sarini came upon him he grovelled for his life. Of course, I don't know what he said, but I saw the poor creature grovel; and then that Count, he shot him just as you might a rabbit, Mr. Glanfield; and then I crept away and hid myself in the wood, and there I've been shivering and shaking ever since, till these two policemen found me and dragged me out, that is, if they are policemen. The Count and his head-man were dressed like peasants this morning. I shall die of horror if I am not taken out of this charnel-house; and as for Count Patroceni, whether he shoots me or not I don't care."

"Well, your troubles are at an end, Jackson," said Sir Jasper. "The police have had the best of it. We are free men, and shall commence our return journey to Naples this afternoon."

"And these murderers," said Jackson, glancing around him with scared looks, "are they still at large? If that Count is loose we shall never have a quiet night's rest until we get back to England."

"You may set your mind at ease," remarked Glanfield. "Count Patroceni's hours are sped, and as for his band they are to a man in the hands of the police."

"He didn't leave many to fall into the hands of the police," rejoined Jackson. "They're all lying dead by the side of the brook there."

Then the doctor emerged from the tent.

"He is going fast," he said quietly. "You struck home, Signor Leroux—an internal hemorrhage has set in. He is very anxious to know how the Signor Wheldrake is, and he is also very desirous of seeing you, signor," continued the doctor, addressing Glanfield. "Perhaps you would not mind coming to him at once, for he is sinking so rapidly that

I cannot undertake to say how long he will be conscious or capable of speech."

Glanfield followed the doctor into the tent, where the dying man lay stretched on his pallet-bed. His naturally sallow complexion was somewhat blanched, but his dark eyes still glittered with all the fierce, untameable light of yore.

"Ah, Mr. Glanfield," he said, "I am glad to have the opportunity of saying good-bye to you. A fine moral lesson this, to a lover of the racecourse like you. Never despair; luck may always turn at the last moment. I bear you no malice, though by this time, if the police had not intervened, I should have shot you ruthlessly under the necessities of the situation. I have become a brigand by force of circumstances; and you know that our profession would very speedily become almost useless if we did not impress these two facts upon the public: first, that treachery to us means death; secondly, that if our prisoners fail to redeem their lives we take them. Well, it was a close shave, but the cards ran all your way at the finish, and you have won the trick. I am not one to whimper because I have lost the game; and there is one comfort," he continued, with a cynical smile, "they will not be able to enforce the penalties for the revoke. My time has come. I am glad to hear that Mr. Wheldrake is likely to do well. I am getting faint. Give me a strong dose of that spirits and water on the table there; it will give me strength for a little longer."

He swallowed two or three mouthfuls from the cup that Glanfield silently handed him.

"That's better," he muttered. "He, like you," he continued, "is a victim to the exigences. Tell him the baccarat here is played as we played it at Wrottsley. Robert Coleman, the footman—Robert Coleman, don't forget the name—he was Hammerton's confederate; find him, and he can tell you everything. And now good-bye," and the Count extended his hand.

Glanfield clasped it, and, as he said afterwards, "It was a

queer sensation, shaking hands with a man who had deliberately determined on your extinction a few hours before."

"Sarini is a prisoner, I suppose?" said the Count. "If he is not too badly hurt let them bring him here. I should like to see him again before I go."

A few minutes more and Sarini, closely guarded, entered the tent. By the police-agent's orders they had however removed his bonds, and the bandit was enabled to walk freely up to the bedside of his dying chief.

"Farewell, old comrade. I have got my death-wound at last. It was a strange device by which they trapped us; and if by any chance you escape from their toils once more give the police-agent who planned this *ruse*—I thought to have settled with him myself, but ——" and he motioned to Sarini to stoop down to hear what he had to say.

Sarini bent his head to listen to the dying man's last injunctions.

"I have dealt with two of our betrayers—Hammerton and Giovanni," whispered Patroceni. "I leave you to settle with the third. Should you escape, avenge me on that fox, Leroux."

"If ever I should regain freedom I swear it," replied Sarini, in a low whisper.

Patroceni feebly clasped his old comrade's hand for a few seconds, then murmured "Good-bye," and turned away his face.

The doctor promptly ordered the tent to be cleared; and when next he went to look at his patient the famous bandit had fallen into that sleep that knows no waking.

CHAPTER LIII.

CONCLUSION.

Leroux's prognostications about their all leaving the camp in the afternoon were not destined to be realised. To begin with, although a doctor had accompanied the police-force they had no ambulances on which to move the wounded men, and the doctor was peremptory on that point. He said that Wheldrake and one of the others must be conveyed to Naples with very great care. Any roughing it would inevitably bring on high fever, and in the second place the brigands recovered so slowly from the very strong narcotic that had been administered to them that the marching them into Naples was utterly impracticable. That little knot, just opposite the stepping-stones, who had drunk the deepest, and with whom the revel had been most prolonged, were as yet by no manner of means to be roused. The whole band had of course been thoroughly disarmed, and were now carefully guarded. Leroux had himself seen each thoroughly searched, and that all their knives, poignards, or pistols were secured.

The police-agent felt there was nothing for it but to send into Naples for ambulances, to order carriages to come from thence, and meet them on the Amalfi road, and simply remain where he was until the next morning.

It may easily be supposed that Maude was now all impatience to go to her lover's bedside. She protested that she was quite calm; that her place was there; and that it was cruel not to allow her to see him. Her father and Glanfield parried these attacks as best they might; but Mrs. Fullerton, who had a fellow-feeling for her niece, was not to be so easily repulsed. She got hold of the doctor, set the whole case before him, and at length extracted from him

an admission that if the young lady promised to control herself, and that his patient, when he awoke, showed no symptoms of aggravated fever, he thought there would be very little harm in her doing so.

"He is at the present time in a calm slumber, due, chiefly, to a strong composing draught that I have administered to him. But I dare say that, in some two or three hours, he will rouse himself."

But Maude, having obtained that much permission, at once took matters into her own hands. She glided quietly into the tent, and, seating herself on a box by the bedside, sat still and motionless, watching her lover.

It was mid-day before he showed signs of restlessness.

He tossed a bit on his couch, murmured indistinctly; and then, as he roused himself, his lips syllabled the word "water!"

She had a cooling-drink by her side, and in a moment had raised the tumbler to his parched lips. He swallowed a few mouthfuls, and then said:

"Where am I? What does it all mean? Maude, my dearest, you here? Ah! I remember now. I ran to Glanfield's assistance, but was shot down. My side is very sore, and I feel terribly weak. But how did you come here?"

"We are never going to part again, Cyril. They have given me leave to nurse you, and I will soon have you well again, darling, when I once get you down to Naples. We are to stay here for the night, while they get ambulances, carriages, and things to carry you and the others into the city."

"What others? Tell me what has happened."

"I will, Cyril, if you promise not to talk. You must know that there are others hurt besides you. The police attacked the camp, and have captured the whole band; but there was fighting over it, and several of them were badly wounded—Count Patroceni himself, I believe, mortally.

The doctor says you are all right, and will come round with careful nursing; and I will take care, my own, that you don't want for that; and now, you mustn't talk any more. I have promised not to let you excite yourself. Try and go to sleep again."

"I'll do my best, Maude; but I can't say. I think there is much hope of it. Is Jim Glanfield all right?"

"Yes, Mr. Glanfield is quite unhurt. I heard him say that he had pretty nearly choked the life out of somebody, so I am afraid that is more than his assailants can say: and now not another word."

"And when did you say we were to leave here?"

But Maude shook her head, put her finger on her lips, and resumed her old seat on the box.

In the course of the afternoon Sir Jasper went to have one more look at his luckless nephew. The body had been moved from the place where he had been slain, and was now placed in the same tent with his murderer. The two men lay side by side, all rancour and hatred between them extinguished by the universal destroyer. It might be said that they had mutually cost each other their lives; for, had it not been for Patroceni's ill-starred visit to England, and all that came of it, the probabilities are Sir Jasper and his party would never have set foot in Italy. The baronet has drawn back the sheet that covers them, and is gazing mournfully into the two faces, set in all the calm placidity of death. Softened as men's faces are

> "Before decay's effacing fingers
> Have swept the lines where beauty lingers."

Yes, "the rapture of repose" was there. These two restless spirits slept as tranquilly as if their lives had been less turbulent.

"They are both gone, Sir Jasper," said Glanfield, in a low

tone; "it's not a twelvemonth since they blackened poor Cyril's name at Wrottsley, and they have both expiated the crime. I'm not much of a moralist; but it looks as if Providence checked such sins as theirs off rather rapidly. Well! the Count cleared Cyril's name before he died."

"Do you mean to say," said the baronet, in a whisper, as he quietly replaced the sheet, "that Wheldrake can be proved innocent?"

"Yes; it is no place to speak of it here. I don't want to pass harsh judgment over those gone to their account and yet lying unburied; but I can explain everything that took place that night at Wrottsley, and as soon as we get to England pledge myself to produce their confederate."

"Only do that, Glanfield, and you will make me the happiest man in England."

Glanfield's sole reply was a hearty hand-grip, and then the two men left the tent.

As the day wore on the brigands slowly began to recover; they had slept off their opiate and came to themselves in various states of sorrow and sadness. Recovery from a severe opiate is of itself apt to be woefully depressing; but when to that you add the awaking to find yourself in the hands of the police, with a vista of imprisonment, the galleys, or possible execution before you, the salt of existence seems indeed to have lost its savour. A more crestfallen crew than these men of the mountain it was scarcely possible to picture. Their captors treated them with contemptuous good-nature; but it is to be regretted that one denizen of the camp showed undue exultation at the discomfiture of his foes. Old Jackson could not resist walking about amongst them and giving vent to chuckles of satisfaction and sarcastic taunts at their present positions.

"You wine-swilling pigs! This is what comes of not taking your liquor like gentlemen! It's time savages like you were suppressed! Savages who don't know what's due

to upper-servants! The idea of leaving a man in my position to sleep out on the grass all night as if he were a hare! You will see what nice little lodgings they will find for you when they get you into Naples." In short, old Jackson's conduct was far from magnanimous when he found himself on the winning side.

In the course of the next day Leroux found himself ready to move. Wheldrake had passed a good night, and the doctor's other cases were progressing favourably. The brigands were handcuffed two and two. Sarini was escorted with a special guard, and the *cortège* moved down the mountain by the nearest cut to the Amalfi road, where carriages were waiting to convey Sir Jasper and his party back to Naples.

Their arrival created no little curiosity in the city. People flocked to get a glimpse of the famous bandit, little dreaming that his remains and those of Captain Hammerton were in the covered litter that followed the *cortège*—indeed, as the police with their prisoners passed through the street. Sarini was generally mistaken for his dead chief. As soon as they were comfortably installed in their hotel, the death of Hammerton was broken to Mrs. Fullerton and Maude, and the two women were unfeignedly shocked at the tidings; for, whatever his sin against Maude and Wheldrake, it had been severely expiated; and how loyally he had performed his task as envoy to arrange for the ransom Leroux was able to testify.

The next day they laid him to rest in the cemetery; and even Glanfield, who judged his conduct past all extenuation, muttered a prayer for the dead man's soul as he stood by his grave.

It was a week or two, yet, before they could set sail for England. Wheldrake's return to convalescence was tedious. Although he progressed, on the whole, favourably, he was not without what was almost inevitable in a recovery from

severe illness—"his bad days." The fever, consequent upon his wound, clung to him, and made Maude, at times, excessively anxious. As for the luckless bandits, if the authorities had been slow to take measures against them they lost no time in meting out punishment for their misdeeds. Sarini and two more made a bitter ending of it one morning at daybreak, while the remainder were translated to the galleys for a term of years that left small chance of their ever again resuming their profession. Wheldrake was at last pronounced sufficiently well to be moved, and the whole party embarked for England without further delay.

On their arrival, Glanfield ordered Chisel to lose no time in discovering the whereabouts of Robert Coleman. That he had left Wrottsley they, of course, knew from Jackson; still Chisel expected to have no difficulty about laying his hand upon him. But in this they were at first doomed to disappointment. Chisel could learn no tidings of him whatever. He had come to London and, apparently, disappeared in the whirlpool of the metropolis. Glanfield, to begin with, contented himself with putting an advertisement in the papers to the effect that if Robert Coleman would call upon Messrs. Seeling and Whax (his solicitors) he would hear of something to his advantage. But some days passed and this elicited no response. Mr. Coleman, it may be remembered, was in the strict retirement of one of her Majesty's gaols, and, consequently, not likely to see the journals. Glanfield was talking this over in the smoking-room of his club one evening with an intimate friend of both his and Wheldrake's, and explaining to him why he was so anxious to find this Robert Coleman.

"What! to clear Cyril Wheldrake of a false imputation of card-sharping? By Jove! you know, the man must be found. Just let me look at the advertisement. In all the dailies, you say?" and as he spoke Glanfield's companion rose and fetched a paper from an adjoining table. "Oh,"

he continued, "here it is, 'something to his advantage. Apply to Seeling and Whax, Lincoln's Inn Fields.' That is not quite the sort of advertisement, my dear Jim, to fetch him. I know the sort of firm, old family solicitors, very guarded and cautious. No, no, this won't do; advertise to-morrow: 'Twenty pounds reward to any one who will give information concerning the whereabouts of Robert Coleman. Apply to James Glanfield, Esq., Blenheim Club, Pall Mall.' You'll find that you'll get an answer to that before the week's out."

Glanfield followed his friend's advice, and speedily found his prediction realised.

Mr. Samuel Bludd has only flitted across these pages in fugitive fashion—has indeed no bearing on this history, except for his fleeting connection with Robert Coleman. It may be remembered, after squeezing that unfortunate till he had left him as dry as a sucked orange, he adopted him as a companion in fraud; that the result was disastrous; and that the penalty was paid, as is too often the case, by the neophyte, while the hardened criminal went scatheless. To a man of Mr. Bludd's pursuits the perusal of what is termed the "Agony Column" in the daily papers was a mere matter of business. He never expected to hear of anything to his advantage, but he had over and over again found advertisements that with a little dexterity on his part he had made turn out highly profitable to himself. No sooner did he catch sight of this notice than Mr. Bludd thought to himself, "I can furnish them with the necessary information. This don't look like a plant, and to pick up a twenty-pound note is worth running a little risk for; I'll chance it." Accordingly Glanfield received a line from him the next day to say that the writer for the consideration advertised would put him in possession of the information he required, provided no further questions were asked, and would call upon him at the Blenheim about six o'clock that afternoon.

True to his tryst Mr. Bludd arrived at that hour, and was immediately shown into a small room off the hall devoted by the members to seeing people on business.

Glanfield was not the man to make a muddle of an interview of this nature. He reckoned up Mr. Bludd at a glance, and knew exactly the line to take with a man of his calibre.

"Now, Mr. Bludd," he said, as he entered the room where that gentleman was awaiting him, "let's understand each other at once; there's nothing like plain-speaking on these occasions. 'No further questions asked,' I presume means that you and Robert Coleman have been engaged in some affair in which publicity is not desirable. I want to know nothing about that. I mean no harm to Robert Coleman; on the contrary, there is another twenty pounds for him if he will only answer two or three questions I wish to put to him—questions which can by no possibility bring him into any trouble."

A very shrewd man was Mr. Bludd, and he had already divined that Robert Coleman was wanted with reference to the Wrottsley card-case. But then the papers had rung with the Amalfi tragedy. Mr. Bludd knew perfectly well that Hammerton was dead, and that when his "tear friend," Robert Coleman, was released from prison the game of *chantage* was over.

"Very well, sir," he replied. "I knows a gentleman when I sees him, bless you. Write me a cheque for the twenty pounds, and I will give you Robert Coleman's address."

"You're a little too fast, my friend," replied Glanfield, curtly. "I must have a little more guarantee as to the truth of your story."

"Look here, Misther Glanfield, write me a cheque dated the day after to-morrow. That will give you to-morrow to see if it is right or not. Go to Millbank and ask for Robert Coleman under the name of Charles Harrison. That's right, s'help me. He's in there doing time."

"That'll do," said Jim, and sitting down to the table he

wrote a cheque for the amount and handed it over to Mr. Bludd. "Then," he said, "if I find your information all right you'll get your money; if not, you'll find that cheque stopped at the bank."

"That'll do, Mr. Glanfield. That's right, sir. You'll find Robert Coleman to-morrow. Good-night, sir. I only wish there was somebody else's address you were wanting at the same price. Dash me!" muttered the Jew, as he walked down the club steps, "how I should like to sell the whole London Directory on the same terms!"

Glanfield went down to Millbank the next day, armed with an order to see Robert Coleman, alias Charles Harrison. He found the ex-footman in a very crestfallen condition, and only too glad, on hearing of Hammerton's death and the promise of a twenty-pound note on his discharge, to confess his share of the Wrottsley business. He was, he said, paid by Hammerton to wait until the card-table broke up, and, when the players retired to rest, he stole into the drawing-room and abstracted all the superfluous nines. "On the occasion of Jackson's discovery he had been so tired the previous evening that he had gone to bed, intending to get up early and re-arrange the cards; but he had overslept himself, and, when he rushed downstairs to the drawing-room, Jackson had anticipated both him and the other footman, and was already re-sorting the cards."

With Coleman's confession, written out and attested, Sir Jasper was only too glad to withdraw the remnants of his opposition to Wheldrake's marriage with his daughter; while, when Glanfield told the whole story of Patroceni's confession, supported by the written testimony of the ex-footman, club-land gladly welcomed back one of its most popular denizens within its various walls.

My story is told. That the bells were ringing at Wrottsley, and the famous Wrottsley ale a-humming in honour of a double wedding before three months were over, must be a

fact patent to all readers of this narrative; and that Jackson should regale the housekeeper's room with wondrous accounts of his adventures among the brigands may be easily conceived. In the course of years the wondrous tale so grew in the telling, that the graphic account of how he (Jackson) slew Patroceni and saved the lives of his master and his friends became quite the accepted version; and there was an undefined feeling that the Victoria Cross was by no means bestowed impartially.

THE END.

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